Sex and Cyberspace: The Internet in the Sexual Lives of Men Who Have Sex With Men

by

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Dalla Lana School of Public Health
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Abstract

The Men, Internet, and Sex with Men Study was a qualitative inquiry into how men who have sex with men (MSM) use the Internet in their sexual lives. The study responds to calls for HIV prevention to become more resonant with men’s online experiences.

Men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives was explored through structural interactionist and social risk theories. The study was a focused ethnography, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 23 MSM from the Greater Toronto Area. The sample included men aged 20 to 61, from a variety of sexual orientations (gay, bisexual, and heterosexual) and HIV statuses. Data analysis focused on the contextual aspects of men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes and their sexual risk behaviour.

This study focused on how men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes was situated within and influenced by the contexts of their use. The participants’ online experiences were socially-situated from the outset: men saw the Internet as a “solution” to challenges in their sexual lives; their online interactions were structured by online rules of engagement and discourse from the offline gay community; and their sexual risk behaviour was mediated by social context and sexual interactions.
The participants’ stories revealed the existence of an online subculture for sex seeking. Men also talked about the links between their online and offline experiences, where the Internet played a role in developing their sexuality but could also foster isolation and addiction. The men emphasized the importance of online HIV prevention and offered suggestions on how prevention more generally might be improved.

The Internet holds both promise and pitfalls for HIV prevention. The findings from this study underline the need for prevention efforts that focus on individual- and structural-level prevention which can respond to men’s experiences both online and offline.
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Table of Contents

Abstract.......................................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................ iv
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... v
List of Tables ................................................................................................................................ ix
List of Figures................................................................................................................................ x
List of Appendices........................................................................................................................ xi

Chapter 1 Introduction................................................................................................................. 1
  1.1. Men who have Sex with Men, Sex and the Internet ........................................................... 1
  1.2. MSM and HIV/AIDS .......................................................................................................... 2
  1.3. The Importance of the Men, Internet and Sex with Men (MISM) Study ....................... 3
  1.4. Overview of the Dissertation ..............................................................................................5

Chapter 2 Literature Review ....................................................................................................... 7
  2.1. The Relevant Literature ...................................................................................................... 7
    2.1.1. Internet and Interpersonal Communication ............................................................ 7
    2.1.1.1. Online Dating ......................................................................................... 10
    2.1.2. Sex and Gay Culture ......................................................................................... 12
    2.1.3. Sexual Decision-Making among MSM .......................................................... 16
      2.1.3.1. Social Psychological Perspectives....................................................... 16
      2.1.3.2. Social Perspectives ................................................................................. 17
    2.1.4. The Internet, Gay Culture and Sex Seeking ...................................................... 21
      2.1.4.1. MSM and the Use of the Internet for Sexual Purposes ....................... 23
    2.1.5. Men’s Views on HIV Prevention .......................................................................... 30
    2.1.6. Online HIV Prevention Initiatives ........................................................................ 32
      2.1.6.1. Information Provision ............................................................................. 33
      2.1.6.2. Personalized Outreach ............................................................................. 34
      2.1.6.3. Partner Notification and Online Testing ................................................. 36

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework............................................................................................ 39
  3.1. A Theoretical Fit for the Study ......................................................................................... 39
    3.1.1. Symbolic Interactionism ....................................................................................... 39
    3.1.2. Structural Interactionism ....................................................................................... 42
    3.1.3. Social Theories of Risk ......................................................................................... 44
    3.1.4. Progression of Study Purpose and Theory ............................................................ 47
  3.2. Research Questions ........................................................................................................ ... 49
  3.3. Research Objectives .......................................................................................................... 50
  3.4. Theory and the Research Question and Objectives .......................................................... 52
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4 Methodology</th>
<th>.......................................................... 54</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1. The Qualitative Approach</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2. Research Design</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1. Definitions</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1.1. Men who have Sex with Men (MSM)</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1.2. Internet and Same-Sex Sexual Purposes</td>
<td>......................................................................................... 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2. Research Sample</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2.1. Recruitment</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2.2. Recruitment Challenges</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2.3. Description of the Sample</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3. Data Collection</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.4. Data Analysis</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5. Ethics</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6. Research Rigour and Reflexivity</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6.1. Rigour</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6.2. Reflexivity</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 5 Men’s Situated Use of the Internet for Sexual Purposes</th>
<th>.................................................. 78</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1. Chapter Overview</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2. Using the Internet for Same-Sex Sexual Purposes</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1. Offline Sexual Encounters</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2. Simulated Sex</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3. Sexual Education and Exploration</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3. Structuring Contexts: The Internet as “Solution”</td>
<td>......................................................................................... 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1. Resolving Tensions Related to Same-Sex Sexual Interests</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2. Overcoming Restricted Social Connections</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3. Disenchantment with Seeking Sex Offline</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.4. Improving the Sex Seeking Experience</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4. A Typology of Men’s Internet Use for Sexual Purposes</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1. MSM with “Mature” Sexual Careers</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2. MSM with Less “Mature” Sexual Careers</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5. Discussion</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 6 Presenting Selves and Constructing Others: The Situated Nature of the Online Sexual Search</th>
<th>.................................................. 102</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1. Chapter Overview</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2. Finding a Sexual Partner</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1. Attracting the Desired Partner: Online Fronts and Legitimated Performances</td>
<td>......................................................................................... 103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2. Constructing the Desired Partner</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3. Presenting and Constructing Sexual Safety</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3.1. Participants’ Views on Safer Sex</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3.2. Sexual Safety through Impression Management</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3.3. Constructing Sexual Safety</td>
<td>............................................................................................................. 119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3. Discussion</td>
<td>.................................................................................................................. 122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 7 Context, Cyberspace and Sexual Risk ................................................................. 129
  7.1. Chapter Overview ........................................................................................................ 129
  7.2. The Sexual Encounter ............................................................................................... 129
  7.3. “Risk” and “Risky” Sexual Encounters ...................................................................... 130
    7.3.1. “Risk” Encounters ............................................................................................. 130
      7.3.1.1. Risk Reduction .................................................................................. 130
      7.3.1.2. Resisting Safer Sex ........................................................................ 133
    7.3.2. “Risky” Encounters ......................................................................................... 134
      7.3.2.1. Interactional Ambiguity ...................................................................... 135
      7.3.2.2. Preserving a Desired Connection ...................................................... 136
      7.3.2.3. Ending an Unwanted Connection ................................................... 140
  7.4. Discussion ................................................................................................................ 142

Chapter 8 Impacts and Progressions .................................................................................. 149
  8.1. Chapter Overview .................................................................................................... 149
  8.2. “There’s definitely a whole little culture to it”: An Online Sex Seeking Subculture ...... 150
  8.3. Perspectives on the Offline Encounter: Makings of The Bad (The Ugly) and the Good Experience ............................................................................................................. 153
    8.3.1. Unpleasant Surprises: The Bad Experiences .................................................... 154
    8.3.2. More than Just Sex: The Good Experiences ................................................... 157
  8.4. Links Between Online and Offline Worlds .................................................................. 158
    8.4.1. Developing Sexuality ..................................................................................... 158
    8.4.2. Isolating Effects ............................................................................................. 160
    8.4.3. “You do it once, you do it twice…then it’s a habit”: Perceptions of Addiction to Internet Sex Seeking ........................................................................................................... 161
  8.5. Participants’ Views on HIV Prevention ...................................................................... 162
    8.5.1. Content of HIV Materials ............................................................................. 162
    8.5.2. Delivery of HIV Prevention .......................................................................... 164
  8.6. Discussion ................................................................................................................ 165

Chapter 9 Implications for Prevention, Theory and Method .............................................. 168
  9.1. Chapter Overview .................................................................................................... 168
  9.2. “Structuring Contexts”: Structure, Interaction and Men’s Use of the Internet for Sexual Purposes ...................................................................................................................... 168
  9.3. The Internet in the Sexual Lives of MSM: Promises and Pitfalls for HIV Prevention .. 171
    9.3.1. Promise ......................................................................................................... 173
    9.3.2. Pitfalls ........................................................................................................... 174
      9.3.2.1. Breached “Ground Rules” .................................................................. 174
      9.3.2.2. Developing “Trust” in Online Relationships .......................................... 175
      9.3.2.3. Conditioning Disempowered Encounters ........................................ 176
      9.3.2.4. The Nature of Online Socialization ................................................... 178
  9.4. Implications for HIV Prevention ................................................................................ 180
    9.4.1. Potential Directions for Online HIV Prevention ......................................... 180
      9.4.1.1. Content ............................................................................................. 181
      9.4.1.2. Reach and Delivery ........................................................................... 183
  9.5. Implications for Theory and Method ........................................................................ 187
    9.5.1. Theoretical Contributions ............................................................................. 188
9.5.1.1. Internet and “Liberated” Communication ............................................ 188
9.5.1.2. Structural Interactionism and Social Risk Theory .......................... 188
9.5.2. Methodological Contributions ............................................................... 190
9.6. Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 191
9.6.1. Research Questions and Objectives ................................................................. 191
9.6.2. Strengths and Limitations of the Study ......................................................... 194
9.6.3. Directions for Future Research ................................................................. 195

References ...................................................................................................................... 198

Appendices .................................................................................................................... 230
Appendix A: Literature Review Table ........................................................................ 230
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer Text ......................................................................... 234
Appendix C: gay.com Profile for Study .................................................................... 235
Appendix D: GayGuideToronto.com Advertisement ............................................. 236
Appendix E: Revised Interview Schedule ................................................................. 237
Appendix F: Letter of Information .......................................................................... 242
Appendix G: Consent Form ..................................................................................... 243
List of Tables

Table 1: Selected Demographics by Participant ................................................................. 68
List of Figures

Figure 1: Theoretical Model ......................................................................................................... 49
# List of Appendices

Appendix A: Literature Review Table ................................................................. 230

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer Text ................................................................. 234

Appendix C: *gay.com* Profile for Study ........................................................... 235

Appendix D: *GayGuideToronto.com* Advertisement ......................................... 236

Appendix E: Revised Interview Schedule .......................................................... 237

Appendix F: Letter of Information ................................................................. 242

Appendix G: Consent Form ................................................................. 243
Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1. Men who have Sex with Men, Sex and the Internet

This dissertation reports findings from the Men, Internet and Sex with Men (MISM) Study, a qualitative inquiry into the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of men who have sex with men (MSM).

Since the onset of the AIDS epidemic, there has been a keen interest in understanding – or at least, attempting to understand – why gay men and other MSM have unprotected sex and continue to be disproportionately affected by HIV and AIDS. There is also ongoing interest in the intersection of technology and sex – that is, how technological advances open up new opportunities for expanding and exploring one’s sexual experiences (Durkin & Bryant, 1995; Quinn & Forsyth, 2005). Indeed, Edelman (2009) recently noted how the adult entertainment industry has “repeatedly proven to be among the first to adopt new imaging technologies,” from ancient sculpture to the Internet (p. 210).

The Internet, of course, has had a profound effect on communication generally. Given how technology has been embraced for sexual purposes in the past, it is not surprising that the Internet too has been exploited for sexual opportunities. The adult entertainment industry has skyrocketed with the advent of the Internet, especially as technological advances within Internet communication itself have altered the delivery of sexual material – from stories, to pictures, to video, to interactive video. It was reported that, in 2006, the Internet accounted for 22% of the nearly $13 billion dollar adult entertainment industry (AVN Media Network, 2008). Accessing sexually explicit materials remains one of the more popular uses of the Internet for sexual purposes (Ropelato, n.d.). Other uses of the Internet for sexual purposes include cybersex¹ and finding sex partners online for offline sexual encounters.

¹ Cybersex is the practice of engaging in sexual chat with another person, oftentimes accompanied by self-stimulation and orgasm.
More generally, the Internet has been extolled as a communication medium which allows people to meet new people, find and participate in new social groups, and expand their social networks. These opportunities likewise exist in the sexual arena: Internet communication can facilitate the expansion of sexual as well as social networks, as people use the Internet to explore sexuality and to indeed meet partners for offline sexual encounters.

Realizing the sexual potential of the Internet, researchers and public health service providers started investigating the role of the Internet in people’s sexual lives, with a specific interest in MSM. As expanded on later, this literature has focused largely on the role of the Internet in sexual risk behaviour among MSM, making the issue one of interest to public health. Of course, this literature is not without controversy and debate, as discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

Regardless of the debates in the literature, some things are clear: MSM do use the Internet in their sexual lives for a variety of purposes and they do meet sexual partners online for offline encounters. Therefore, there is a demonstrated need to understand more thoroughly the experiences of MSM online, especially to understand their sexual risk behaviour and opportunities for innovative HIV prevention. This is especially true as more critical, social science based literature on HIV prevention stresses the need to fashion prevention initiatives which respect and respond to men’s actual sexual experiences, especially by paying heed to how those experiences are embedded within men’s broader social and sexual interactions. Unfortunately, such inquiry has largely been lacking in this field so far, and it is here that this study seeks to contribute.

1.2. MSM and HIV/AIDS

Men who have sex with men have been disproportionately affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic since its onset in the early 1980s (Merson, O’Malley, Serwadda, & Apisuk, 2008). Therefore, there has been a consistent interest among public health practitioners and researchers about “understanding” the sexual behaviour of MSM and its relation to HIV transmission.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (2007), MSM continue to account for the greatest number of both prevalent and incident HIV infections in Canada, and there is evidence of an increase in the number of new HIV infections among MSM from 2002 to 2005. This situation is mirrored in Ontario (Calzavara et al., 2002; Calzavara et al., 2008; Remis et al.,
and in other areas of Canada (Alary et al., 2003; Lampinen et al., 2003; Lampinen et al., 2005; Remis, Njihia, Swantee, & Merid, 2005). In Ontario, HIV diagnoses among MSM increased by 38% in 2004 compared to 2000, and MSM represent 62% of HIV-infected persons in the province (Remis, Swantee, Schiedel, Merid, & Liu, 2006). In 2000, it was estimated that of the approximately 110 322 MSM in Ontario, 11.2% were HIV-positive (Remis et al., 2000, table 7.2). On a national level, estimates indicate a 13% increase in HIV prevalence among MSM since 2002, the largest absolute increase in Canada (Boulos, Yan, Schanzer, Remis, & Archibald, 2006, p. 167). Further, numerous reports have shown continued and increased risk behaviour among MSM in Canada (Boulos et al., 2006; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007).

At the same time, MSM in Canada, as in other countries, have embraced the Internet as a place to explore their sexuality and to find sexual partners. The 2004 Ontario Men’s Survey indicated that approximately 35% of the MSM sampled used the Internet to find sexual partners, second only to finding sex partners at gay bars (~60%) (Myers & Allman, 2004, p. 50, table 18). Recent data from British Columbia also report that approximately 33% of MSM sampled there sought sex partners online (Ogilvie et al., 2008). Further, research into the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM in Canada has been identified as a priority in sexual health promotion (“The 2005 sexual health promotion research needs assessment,” 2005). Finally, as the literature review will demonstrate, there is a paucity of Canadian research in this area relative to work conducted in other countries.

These statistics make three points clear. First, MSM in Canada continue to be a central population affected by HIV/AIDS. Second, MSM in Canada still engage in sexual risk behaviour, despite concerted prevention efforts. Finally, MSM in Canada use the Internet to find sex partners for offline encounters. This study sought to explore the role that the Internet plays in the sexual lives of MSM, and especially the role it may play in sexual risk behaviour among MSM in Canada.

1.3. The Importance of the Men, Internet and Sex with Men (MISM) Study

The Men, Internet and Sex with Men (MISM) Study was borne of both empirical and theoretical concerns. Like early research in the field, the MISM Study was conceptualized around the realization that MSM had adopted the Internet has a new venue to find sex partners, coupled with
empirical research on sexual risk behaviour among MSM which suggested that the location of sex seeking can influence the sexual behaviour (e.g., Flowers, Marriott, & Hart, 2000; Flowers & Duncan, 2002). At the same time, there was some early recognition that men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes may have implications for sexual risk behaviour and HIV transmission (but also for HIV prevention). This early research raised questions about the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM.

When this study was first conceived (late 2001, early 2002), the small but growing field of scholarship in this area was largely quantitatively focused, with an emphasis on comparing risk behaviours of MSM who sought sex online versus those MSM who did not. The literature had not yet begun to take a more sociological perspective on this issue, by considering the Internet and sexual risk behaviour in relation to men’s social and sexual lives. Such an approach was imperative given the growing realization that, following social theories of risk, sexual risk behaviour needs to be understood from a social perspective and account for how sexual encounters are embedded within broader social contexts.

There exists now a large body of research on the topic of the Internet and MSM, as explored in chapter 2. However, this literature continues to leave important questions about the role of the Internet in the lives of MSM unanswered, as identified in greater detail in the literature review. While there is now a small but growing canon of qualitative work in this area, qualitative, theoretically-driven approaches are still in the minority. However, such inquiry remains a very important avenue for discovering the HIV transmission and prevention implications of cyberspace in the lives of MSM.

The qualitative approach is particularly important here given recent calls in the HIV prevention literature for prevention efforts which are more responsive to the actual needs and experiences of MSM. It is a cornerstone of health communication theory that efforts to alter behaviour must be relevant to the audiences in question, hence the importance of formative research in the design of behaviour modification initiatives (Atkin & Freimuth, 2001).

To this end, Adam and colleagues (2005) importantly observe that “since prevention necessarily appeals to those engaging in a practice, it cannot get *emic* understandings [explanations that make sense to the observed] wrong, or prevention messages will be ineffective” (p. 239). This is particularly true in the case of the Internet in men’s sexual lives: “If health promotion initiatives
are to maintain…effectiveness within cyberspace, they need to engage with participants in ways that are consistent with how the Internet is used and what it means to participants to be part of the environment [italics added]” (Brown, Maycock, & Burns, 2005, p. 71). These calls are best answered by an approach that can investigate men’s experiences of their use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes – from their own perspectives – and consider how those perspectives are situated within the men’s broader social and sexual lives.

Thus this study is significant as it aimed to fill a rather important gap in the extant literature. It sought to investigate men’s own perspectives on their use of the Internet for sexual purposes, while illuminating the social contexts influencing this use. It also sought to investigate how men’s sexual risk behaviour was likewise situated. The study aimed to explore the role of the Internet in men’s sexual lives beyond merely an avenue for finding sex partners. Overall, the study aimed to elucidate the nuances and complexities of men’s experiences of using the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes to see what lessons those experiences might hold for the design of innovative HIV prevention.

1.4. Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 presents a literature review focusing on five bodies of knowledge relevant to this topic. Drawing on this review, the chapter highlights shortcomings in the extant research on the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework of the study, as well as the guiding research questions and objectives. Chapter 4 overviews the study methodology and provides a description and discussion of the sample of MSM who participated in this study.

Chapters 5 through 8 report on the empirical findings and analysis from the study data as they related to the study objectives set out in Chapter 3. Chapter 5 presents findings on how the men in the sample used the Internet for same-sex purposes, and investigates how that use was situated within their social and sexual lives more broadly. Chapter 6 focuses on men’s accounts of their experiences with the online sexual search, with specific attention paid to the situated nature of these experiences. Chapter 7 considers specifically the intersections of men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes, the contexts of that usage, and the men’s sexual risk behaviour, highlighting the role of the Internet in “risk” and “risky” sexual situations. Chapter 8 considers men’s online
experiences and how those experiences come to relate to their offline worlds. This chapter also considers the men’s views on HIV prevention.

Chapter 9, the final chapter of the dissertation, overviews the central arguments presented in the dissertation, especially around the potential promise and pitfalls of the Internet in HIV prevention. The chapter highlights potential direction for HIV prevention based on the findings from this study, and also discusses the contributions to theory and method that this study has made. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as directions for future research that this study has identified.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

2.1. The Relevant Literature

This section reviews five key bodies of literature relevant to the central topic of this study: (1) how the Internet has impacted/changed the processes of communication and relationship-building, with a specific focus on online dating; (2) roles and meanings that sexual activity plays in gay culture, as well as aspects of sexual decision-making among MSM; (3) the impact of the Internet on gay culture, both generally and specifically for sexual purposes; (4) how MSM use of the Internet for sexual purposes, the relation of that use to sexual risk behaviour, and the important gaps that exist within this area; and finally (5) the views of MSM for HIV prevention and current initiatives in online HIV/STD prevention.

2.1.1. Internet and Interpersonal Communication

It has been said that the Internet is a relatively “disembodied” communication channel and therefore it permits greater control and negotiation of one’s identity. Much has been made of the idea that because people who communicate online cannot be “seen,” visually at least, while chatting with others on the Internet, chatters possess a certain amount of anonymity. Therefore, one can engage in various levels of “impression management” (Goffman, 1959) to embellish or distort one’s true identity (Waskul & Douglass, 1997), and/or obscure components of the self which may be stigmatizing (Hardey, 2002; Walther, 1996).

As Turkle (1995) put it, the anonymous nature of the Internet allows it to function as somewhat of a “virtual laboratory,” where one can experiment with different versions of their “self” (see also McKenna & Bargh, 2000). An offshoot of this scenario is that new identities can be “tried on,” without running the risk of negative social sanctions in “real life” (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). In this way, individuals can act in ways online that might otherwise be disapproved of in traditional social circles, like revealing negative or stigmatizing things about themselves, or exploring sexual orientations, fantasies and desires, largely without social consequence (Bargh et al., 2002; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; McKenna, Green, & Smith, 2001; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). These opportunities are not trivial: sexual exploration through the Internet has helped “demarginalize” sexual identities for some, who subsequently moved into
real-life relationships in their new sexual identities (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; McKenna et al., 2001).

While these opportunities may sound like a harbingers of liberation, in actuality, they are not; these advantages of Internet communication are restricted and circumvented by two issues: a movement away from strictly textual online communication, and incompatibilities between identity negotiation and the ultimate goal of Internet communication. In the first case, anonymity, and its related advantages, can only operate insofar as Internet communication remains textual. However, technological advances are moving Internet communication more towards the visual (Jones, 2005; Shaw, 1997), necessitating the use of digital photographs and video in online social interaction. The ability to actually “see” a person, then, diminishes the anonymity of the encounter as well as the protections that anonymity can confer.

With a move toward more embodied communication online, individuals become further restricted in the ways in which they can present their physical, embodied selves—distortions and misrepresentations are not easy to cover in a visual communication setting. Thus the ability for persons to radically portray their identities—like altering gender, age, skin colour, abilities, etc. (Waskul & Douglass, 1997)—is made problematic in more visual means of communication. This is not to say, of course, that people cannot continue to misrepresent themselves through the use of fake pictures and the like; this notion raises the incompatibilities of identity negotiations and the goal of Internet communication.

The Internet has changed the way people can and do build social relationships with one another. For example, approaching “strangers” online may reduce the awkwardness, embarrassment and risk which may exist in traditional face-to-face settings (Hardey, 2002, 2004; Shaw, 1997). In a chatroom, for instance, one would expect to be approached by people looking to chat, and rejections from “cyberstrangers” may be easier to manage than in real life. To this end: “Cyberspace makes talking with strangers easier. The fundamental point of many cyber-realms, such as chat rooms, is to make new acquaintances. By contrast, in most urban settings, few environments encourage us to walk up to strangers and start chatting. In many cities, doing so would amount to a physical threat” (Kang, 2000 as cited in Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p. 582). One might surmise this is markedly true for same-sex advances.
Thus the Internet may make it easier for socially anxious and people in remote areas to make social connections that might otherwise not have happened (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Bargh et al., 2002; Tyler, 2002). Connecting with others online imbues actors with a greater sense of control; one can choose whom to speak with, and ignore or otherwise turn down those with whom they do not, without the awkwardness (or risk) of physical presence (Hardey, 2002, 2004). However, there is suggestion as well that chatters may project idealized qualities to their online partners, with the danger of becoming too close with them, too quickly (Bargh et al., 2002).

As such, Bargh and McKenna (2004) point out that the “Internet can be fertile territory for the formation of new relationships…especially those based on shared values and interests” (p. 586). Instead of introducing social pathology, the Internet has, in fact, led to increased self-expression and expanded social networks for many (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Taken further, it has been suggested that with the barriers of physical appearance removed, the Internet may facilitate relationships that may not occur in real life and which are deeper and more stable (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). However, these views fail to take into account the purpose of the relationship. If one is simply seeking a relationship that will remain in the online realm, these factors may not matter. However, when people are seeking friends or romantic/sexual partners for the offline world, these factors remain important. In fact, they may be doubly important when seeking romantic or sexual partners. Therefore it is important to consider the goal of the Internet communication when discussing the relative importance of both the physical body and location.

This perspective raises the issue that, when seeking an online relationship for potential development into an “offline” one, one is limited in the extent to which identity can be negotiated. Thus if the goal is to find a relationship partner—friend, sexual partner, etc.—through the Internet, outside of an ease of making the initial connection, one cannot change his or her own physical self to any great degree: discrepancies between the self presented online and the “true” offline self become obvious when one meets a “cyber” partner in the offline world (Hardey, 2002). In fact, as will be discussed later, the true physical self becomes extremely important in the online sexual quest. In sum, “while [the Internet] promotes the production of multiple selves, those selves are not easily lent to practices of intimacy or community” (Phillips, 2002, p. 419).
This is a particularly important point, given that there is often a connection between one’s “virtual” and “real” lives (Hardey, 2002). As research by McKenna and colleagues (1998; 2001) has shown, people can connect with similar others online, lessening feelings of isolation and difference, and also leading to more positive identification with their identity and incorporation of it into their offline lives. It has been suggested that far from revolutionizing the way social actors relate, the Internet may simply be a new way of performing traditional tasks (Tyler, 2002). The Internet is a new way of making social connections, which may lead to increased numbers of social connections.

Overall, researchers have concluded that the overall impact of the Internet on society is rather unclear (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Tyler, 2002). Early predictions of computer-mediated communication as more equal, democratic and liberating than traditional face-to-face communication (Watt, Lea, & Spears, 2002) have been largely off-base. Further, the main important postulated differences in communication through the Internet—anonymity, physical distance, absence of physical cues, and asynchronicity—are now largely outdated due to technological advances. Moreover, Internet communication, in some forms, may not be completely devoid of normative restrictions that exist in the offline world, nor does it allow for limitless identity and relationship negotiation. In fact, some have suggested that on the “depersonalized” Internet, group norms may be significant guides to behaviour (Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002; Watt et al., 2002).

2.1.1.1. Online Dating

A small literature has investigated the role of the Internet in the traditional dating process. These studies focus mainly on heterosexuals and the development of longer-term, committed relationships, as opposed to casual sexual meetings. These studies tend to focus on two areas: (1) the process and implications of online dating and (2) the presentation of self in online dating.

A number of themes emerge from this literature. Some themes relate to the situated and reflexive nature of Internet communication and online dating. For instance, studies suggest that online communication and the processes of online dating are grounded within offline experiences, and the online dating process can reproduce offline norms and rituals, such that online dating “reflects old patterns and problems common to all forms of courtship” (Lawson & Leck, 2006, p. 206; see also Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008; Hardey, 2002, 2004; Henry-
Waring & Barraket, 2008; van Acker, 2001). Further, studies highlight the reflexive nature of the presentation of self in online dating, where online daters tend to use their interactional experiences as “lessons” in presenting an attractive self online (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). Finally, some of these studies have attempted to situate the use of the Internet for online dating within participants’ offline worlds, focusing on issues such as moving cities; irregular work schedules; and lack of social networks (e.g., Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). Some work has specifically considered how the Internet can be used for cheating on a relationship partner (e.g., Malta, 2007; Mileham, 2007).

Another central focus in these studies has been the development of trust in online relationships. Expressions of emotionality and self-disclosure emerged as key means through which participants developed trust in their online communications (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Gibbs, Ellino, & Heino, 2006; Hardey, 2002, 2004; Lawson & Leck, 2006; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008; Whitty, 2008). Some work exposes the fallacies of this trust, where participants were ultimately disappointed in their offline meeting because they had built “inaccurate pictures” (Lawson & Leck, 2006, p. 198) of their potential partners, and their lengthy online interactions had created a “false sense of connection and intimacy” (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008, p. 23). To this end, studies show support of Walther’s (1996) concept of “hypersonal communication,” where online chatters “idealize” their partners based on their online communications; Rosen et al. (2008), for instance, showed that people may “fill in the blanks about the personality of someone from an online e-mail message alone” (p. 2154; see also Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008; Gibbs et al., 2006; Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008).

Recent work by Couch and Liamputtong (2007, 2008) looked more specifically at processes of online dating and meeting sexual partners among Australians. Their qualitative study had 15 participants, 11 males (all of whom identified as heterosexual) and four females (one of whom identified as heterosexual, the remaining three as bisexual or “bi-curious”). Their findings showed that their participants filtered their potential sexual partners and were able to pre-determine safer sexual encounters before meeting; similar processes emerge in sex seeking among MSM, as discussed later in this chapter. Part of their study focused specifically on perceptions of risk and health among their participants in their experiences of online dating and
drew explicitly from social risk theories (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007). However, their focus was more on managing and minimizing risks to physical safety rather than sexual safety.

While these studies shed some important light on the process of Internet dating among heterosexuals, they do not speak to the experiences of MSM who use the Internet to arrange casual sexual encounters, the focus of this present study.

2.1.2. Sex and Gay Culture

This section overviews the roles and meanings of sex within gay culture. It also includes a discussion on the processes of safer sex decision-making among MSM, with a focus on studies which discuss the broader social and contextual factors which impact the process.

While gay men may have more in common than just sexual interest in other men, the general centrality of sex in gay culture is well-established. Some maintain that sex itself is a key defining feature of gay culture (Plummer, 1975). Sex, though, has represented more than mere physical pleasure for gay men; it has also been a political tool in the fight for gay rights and civil liberties.

Take, for example, casual and (sometimes) impersonal sex with numerous partners,2 which has long been seen as characteristic of gay men (Weeks, 1985), so much so that the well-established practice of “cruising”—seeking same-sex casual partners in public places—has been dubbed a ritual of homosexuality3 (Pollack, 1993) and a gay “social institution” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 295). Within the gay rights movement, the right to and practice of casual sex was a liberation from the prevailing (heterosexual) notions than sex can (or must) only occur within loving, committed (and ostensibly) heterosexual relationships (Loughery, 1998; Risman & Schwartz, 1988), a “creative transformation of and an opposition to the dominant culture’s view of what constitutes legitimate sexual behaviour” (Blachford, 1981, p. 200; Weeks, 1991). Anal sex was likewise viewed as a liberating experience, another deviation from the traditional gender roles of males and females (Davies, Hickson, Weatherburn, & Hunt, 1993). Casual sex was so

2 Older works use the term “promiscuity” or “promiscuous” behaviour; this term, however, carries certain negative overtones.

3 A ritual in the sense that “cruising” can be seen as a right of passage into the freedom of sexual liberation that homosexuality embodies (Pollack, 1993).
important to the gay community that any potential attack on this right, like bathhouse raids and closures in the 1970s and 1980s, was seen as a “threat that bound the gay male community together” (Weeks, 1991, p. 106).

Altman (1982) maintains that the dominance of casual sex does not negate serious relationships among gay men. However, even in relationships, gay men do not default to an assumption of monogamy (Berger, 1990; Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004). For example, two relatively early studies of male couples found little monogamy among the partnerships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found, in fact, that all relationships among the men in their sample which lasted over five years had some provisions for extra-dyadic sex (see also Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985/86). This is not to say that fidelity was completely absent in these couples; instead, the men measured faithfulness in terms of emotional dependence, rather than sexual exclusivity, suggesting that casual sex continued to play a role in these men’s lives, even after partnership.

It was thought that the AIDS crisis might have changed such views and that monogamy would become more normative within the gay culture. More recent research offers mixed results. Studies continue to report men’s difficulties with sexual exclusivity in same-sex couples (Appleby, Miller, & Rothspan, 1999; Worth, Reid, & McMillan, 2002). However, in contrast to the McWhirter and Mattison (1984) study, LaSala (2004) found that 40 of the 121 male same-sex couples in his study had been together without sex occurring outside of the partnership; in fact, 14 of those couples had been together for more than five years. Finally, among the 26% of coupled gay men in Adam’s (2006b) study who said monogamy was an organizing principle of their relationships, most had been together for less than three years. A recent review of studies on gay couples concluded that “reliable empirical evidence on changes in sexual exclusivity among gay male couples is lacking” (Peplau et al., 2004, p. 359; Nardi, 1997).

It is also important to acknowledge the role of gay institutions—gay bars, bathhouses and appropriated public sex environments, such as parks—in connecting sexual partners. These institutions have played roles in both developing and solidifying a gay identity and community, as well as in political battles for gay rights. The existence of public places for anonymous and relatively private sexual meetings with other men dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, although such places carried the concomitant risks of arrest, beatings, robberies or
It was not until the 1970s that bathhouses and other public sex environments proliferated (Bérubé, 2003; Weeks, 1991). In these places, casual, impersonal sex was for the first time widely and relatively easily available, thus they became places to explore and solidify one’s gay identity and affirm denied sexualities (Altman, 1982; Bérubé, 2003; Loughery, 1998; Weeks, 1985, 1991). Unsurprisingly, attempts to regulate, control or close bathhouses in the 1980s were met with great resistance by the gay community, and turned the community into “politically aware” minorities in local politics (Bérubé, 2003; FitzGerald, 1986; Weeks, 1991).

Public sex environments, like parks (Delph, 1978; Tewksbury, 1995, 1996), public toilets (Delph, 1978; Humphreys, 1975), and bathhouses offer the opportunity of casual, impersonal sex with other men. However, they differ in ease of access and safety. For example, in Tewksbury’s (1995) work on parks as “erotic oases” (see also Delph, 1978), he notes that while parks may be the only place some men can find sex, they carry inherent dangers: fear of gay bashing or other violence, robbery, and criminal charges (see also Delph, 1978; Flowers, Hart, & Marriott, 1999; Weinberg & Williams, 1975). Further, finding sex in parks and other public sex environments requires knowledge of which public locations to attend, and when it is safe or appropriate to do so (Delph, 1978).

Bathhouses circumvent many of these concerns. Bérubé (2003) notes that bathhouses allowed the quest for impersonal sex to take place in a safe, erotic, relatively anonymous, private and social environment of peers, a refuge from prejudice protected from authorities and others who may wish to disturb the activities (see also Haubrich, Myers, Calzavara, Ryder, & Medved, 2004; Loughery, 1998; Weinberg & Williams, 1975). Baths offer an efficient structure for sexual partnering: admission is a small expense, everyone is a potential sex partner, and patrons share an understanding that they are looking for casual sexual encounters, which helps limit misunderstandings (Weinberg & Williams, 1975). Anonymity of encounters was important to protect the real identities of men who may not have wished to be identified as “gay.”

Further, it is maintained that bathhouses are places free of notions of rank and hierarchy found in the outside world (Altman, 1982); as Loughery (1998) wrote, bathhouse “orgy” rooms “gave old and young, handsome and unsightly, a more level, less brutally competitive playing field” (p. 362). In reality, though, these premises do not hold. For example, anonymity in bathhouses
cannot be guaranteed when membership or identification is required, when patrons are recognized outside of the bathhouse, or when license plates are seen in parking lots.\textsuperscript{4} Further, even bathhouse settings are not immune to the prevailing and dominant emphases on youth and physical attractiveness in gay culture (Altman, 1982; Blachford, 1981; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Green, 2008; Haubrich, Myers et al., 2004; Plummer, 1975; Weinberg & Williams, 1975); indeed, it has been observed that older and/or overweight bathhouse patrons “spend much of their time cruising with little success” (Weinberg & Williams, 1975, p. 129). Nevertheless, bathhouses, public sex environments, and gay bars (Achilles, 1967/1992), function as places for gay and non-gay-identified men alike to find casual, impersonal sex partners, as the Internet now also does.

Finally, it is important to note the impact of onset of the AIDS epidemic on the gay “sex culture.” The long fought-for sexual liberation and its emphasis and practice of casual (and mostly unprotected) sex among gay men helped facilitate the fast spread of HIV throughout gay communities in North America (FitzGerald, 1986; Weeks, 1985, 1991). However, it was the gay community that first mobilized against AIDS: it organized social and health care for those living with AIDS, carried out research, lobbied for research funds and legislation changes, introduced and promoted safer sex ideals, and instituted a “culture of responsibility” to take care of their selves, as well as their community members (Weeks, 1998, p. 44; Ehrhardt, Yingling, & Warne, 1991; Weeks, 1991). Nevertheless, despite a period of increasing safer sex practices and decreasing HIV/AIDS diagnoses, HIV rates are now once again on the rise, as discussed earlier.

Some reasons for continued unprotected sex between men, two decades after the initial discovery of AIDS, are examined below. The discussion on sex and gay culture was given sustained analysis here because it sets a foundation from which to understand why the Internet may have such intrinsic appeal for sex seeking. This notion is taken up shortly in the discussion on the ways in which the Internet has altered the traditional sex seeking process.

\textsuperscript{4} Perhaps the strongest example of this situation is Humphreys’ (1975) ethically-questionable study, where he surreptitiously recorded the license plate numbers of men having homosexual encounters in public toilets and subsequently uncovered their home addresses, then proceeded to collect personal information from the men under the guise of a survey interviewer.
2.1.3. Sexual Decision-Making among MSM

There is a vast literature on sexual decision-making among MSM, set off by the onset of the AIDS epidemic and the subsequent need to understand both how many men practice unprotected sex and, more importantly, why they do so. The majority of studies have been social-psychological in design, although more recent research has sought to situate men and unprotected sex within more social models, oriented towards broader structural influences on risk behaviour.

2.1.3.1. Social Psychological Perspectives

A sizeable social-psychological literature has identified numerous factors involved with the decision to engage in unprotected sex, including:

- **Treatment optimism**, the idea that the availability of HAART (highly active anti-retroviral therapy) for HIV may lead men to justify unprotected sex based on the beliefs that (a) men on therapy are less likely to transmit the virus and/or (b) that HIV is a chronic, manageable disease, not a death sentence (Crepaz, Hart, & Marks, 2004; Elford, 2006);

- **Safer sex fatigue**, or “burnout” from practicing safer sex (Suarez & Miller, 2001);

- **Serosorting**, engaging in unprotected sex only with partners who share the same HIV status (Elford, 2006; Rhodes & Cusick, 2002; Suarez & Miller, 2001; Van de Ven et al., 2004); men, though, may be dishonest about their status or simply not know it (Jin et al., 2007);

- **Strategic positioning**, where it is assumed the insertive partner in unprotected anal intercourse is at less risk for infection than the receptive partner (Elford, 2006; Van de Ven et al., 2002; Van de Ven et al., 2004), although unprotected insertive anal intercourse nonetheless still carries a risk for HIV transmission (Vittinghoff et al., 1999);
• **Intoxication** by alcohol and/or substance abuse (Elford, 2006; Rhodes & Cusick, 2002; Suarez & Miller, 2001);

• **Lapses in judgment**, due to “heat of the moment” or desire for sex (Adam, Sears, & Schellenberg, 2000; Adam et al., 2005);

• **Condom problems**, either dislike of them, breakage/slippage, and/or delayed application of condoms (Adam et al., 2000; Adam et al., 2005; Calzavara et al., 2003; Davies et al., 1993; Dilley et al., 2002; Rhodes & Cusick, 2002); and

• **Psychological** issues, and using unprotected sex to manage them (Adam et al., 2000; Adam et al., 2005; Ridge, 2004; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000).

These explanations tend to favour the individual as the focus in sexual risk behaviour, without accounting for the context of that risk behaviour. As such, these explanations do not acknowledge the social aspects of risk perception and behaviour, as explored in greater detail below.

### 2.1.3.2. Social Perspectives

There is a growing recognition of the social aspects of risk perception and management, including an emphasis on more sophisticated understandings of the notion of “risk.” Some research, for example, has focused more specifically on broader reasons why men practice “barebacking” (*voluntary* unprotected sex).\(^5\) This research is vital as it demonstrates that sexual decision-making cannot be solely understood from the assumption that men will act to “protect” themselves from HIV. Crossley (2002, 2004), for example, argued that the very fact that certain behaviours are risky may be a primary motivation for unprotected sex. Here, unprotected sex becomes a means of “symbolic transgression and rebellion” (p. 50) against dominant norms, just as casual sex was in the fight for gay rights (see also Davis, 2002; Rofes, 2002). Adam (2005, 2006a), in his study on men who bareback, argued that barebacking was not so much rebellion (nor a result of treatment optimism, safer sex fatigue, or relapse), but rather a manifestation of

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\(^5\) In other words, men who voluntarily engage in anal sex without the use of a condom. “Barebacking” should not be conflated with a practice dubbed “bug-chasing,” which suggests that some HIV-negative men purposefully seek unprotected sex with HIV-positive men so that they may themselves become infected.
neo-liberal discourse, where men constructed unprotected sex as a personal and responsible choice among consenting adults (see also Rhodes & Cusick, 2002). A desire for semen exchange has also been identified as a factor in the decision to have unprotected sex (Gastaldo, Holmes, Lombardo, & O’Byrne, in press; Henriksson, 1995; Holmes & Warner, 2005).

Research also suggests that unprotected sex can be based on a multitude of other factors tied to larger social context. Ridge (2004), for example, found that unprotected sex among young MSM in his study had specific meanings, such as expressions of masculinity and the construction of rationality based on their own understandings of HIV risk. Relationship status has also been related to unprotected sex, where men in couples forgo condom use with their regular partner as a symbol of trust and love and, contrarily, view condom use as a sign of distrust (Adam et al., 2000; Davies et al., 1993; Henriksson, 1995; Rhodes & Cusick, 2002). In a related way, power in sexual encounters also plays a role in unprotected sex: men may feel they do not have the power to negotiate safer sex in some sexual encounters, whether due to age, experience, or skills/efficacy, thus they may unwillingly engage in unprotected sex (Choi, Operario, Gregorich, & Han, 2003; Henriksson, 1995; Rhodes & Cusick, 2002; Ridge, 2004; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000). Other research suggests that high-stress life events influence increases in numbers of casual partners and unprotected receptive anal sex, both risk factors for HIV transmission (Calzavara et al., 2009; Haubrich, Calzavara et al., 2004).

The important point in each of these cases is that unprotected sex does not occur because men do not “know better” or because they are acting “irrationally.” Instead, men may engage in unprotected sex based on their own understandings, legitimations and rationalities about risk and safety. In these ways, risk is socially situated within sexual encounters and situated in conjunction with larger prevailing social discourses and factors. This notion is taken up further in the discussion on social risk theories in the study of sexual behaviour (chapter 3), and it is illuminated in the next discussion, which uses examples of the gay community and partner selection among MSM to demonstrate how social contexts can impact safer sex experiences.

Oftentimes, people speak of a “gay community,” suggesting a network of gay men and women which provides unity, support and a sense of collective identity (e.g., Ross, Fernández-Esquer, & Seibt, 1996). However, research on the experience of gay “community” suggests that the term is a misnomer. Instead, the “community” is a fractured one, cleaved by numerous sub-groups. The
research of Ridge and colleagues (1997; 1999), for instance, found the existence of varied values, knowledges and practices within the gay community in Sydney, Australia: the “community” was divided by a relatively small number of styles which were valued, with high perceived pressure to fit into them. Many men without financial resources to match these styles or without the physical appearance or body shape to do so felt isolated and insecure and also felt increased pressure to change themselves to fit in. Many linked their self-worth and social capital to their ability to find “valuable” partners. Social capital in the community was gained by being of the “right” ethnicity, age, physical attractiveness, and possessing the requisite social skills and economic resources. In sum, rather than unity and support, the men experienced multiple and fragmented cliques with rigid social regulation, where “not belonging to a valued network was to risk ‘otherness’” (Ridge et al., 1997, p. 174; see also Brown, Alley, Sarosy, Quarto, & Cook, 2001).

Ridge’s later work (1999) focused on the experience of Asian men on the same gay scene. These men felt much pressure to fit in with dominant Anglo styles within the community, especially given the racism they experienced. Many felt pressure to assimilate into the dominant white gay culture, by finding white partners, bodybuilding, and adopting dominant gay fashions, often while severing ties with their home cultures. Further, the Asian men felt they were sexually devalued, and they felt they carried little sexual capital in the community. Thus, the men found themselves with a “distinct power disadvantage in their sexual negotiations with Anglo men” (p. 60), whom they themselves tended to value over other Asian men. This example is important, as it illuminates the relationship between social factors and sexual decision-making. These Asian men found it difficult to negotiate safer sex due to the larger factors of their (perceived) “place” within the gay community. There are similar findings from Canada (Chihara, 2006; Poon & Ho, 2002; Poon, Ho, Wong, Wong, & Lee, 2005) and the USA (Choi et al., 1999; Nemoto et al., 2003; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004). Indeed, as one Asian MSM participant in a Canadian study noted, “You were made to feel that you were…inferior….Because you are in the relationship and you did feel inferior, you could feel that you don’t have a say in it [safer sex negotiation] and it could lead to [unsafe sex]” (Poon & Ho, 2002, p. 63). Men of other ethnicities experience similar difficulties in their respective gay communities (Adam et al., 2005; Green, 2008; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000; Woolwine, 2000).
However, this is not an experience restricted to ethnicity, as the gay community is divided on other fronts as well. For example, there is a strong emphasis on youth within the community (Adam et al., 2000; Brown et al., 2001; Kertzner, 2001; Murray & Adam, 2001). There is also a related emphasis on physical attractiveness, where the standards of beauty “remain surprisingly narrow” (Magnan, 2004, p. 13; see also Adam et al., 2000; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000). It has been remarked that “if one does not have the right ‘look’—the cuteness, the straight white teeth, the firm, gym-toned body, even the right clothes—the consequences can be awful” (Gold, 1995, p. S17).

As Shernoff (2002) notes, “exercise, fitness and being ‘buff’ have a high profile and currency in contemporary American culture at large, and in gay male culture in specific” (p. 94; see also Drummond, 2005). To this end, gay men tend to have more issues with body image and eating disorders than heterosexual men, often linked to the centrality of the aesthetic in gay male culture (e.g., Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Peplau et al., in press; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003; Wrench & Knapp, 2008). The impact of body image and weight on unprotected sex is unclear; Moskowitz and Seal (in press), for instance, found that men with high body mass indexes were less likely to reject sexual partners and had less consistent condom use. Conversely, other suggest no difference between obese and non-obese men and unprotected sex (Kraft, Robinson, Nordstrom, Bockting, & Rosser, 2006) or MSM of average weight reporting more unprotected sex than overweight and underweight MSM (Allensworth-Davies, Welles, Hellerstedt, & Ross, 2008).

A number of studies on gay men’s personal ads further illustrate the existence of such cleavages. It has been found that the ads of gay men/MSM: (1) indicate physical attractiveness as a critical factor and the most important determinant in dating (Bartholome, Tewksbury, & Bruzzone, 2000; Phua & Kaufman, 2003); (2) request certain race of potential partner (Bartholome et al., 2000; Phua & Kaufman, 2003); (3) specify age preferences for their potential partners, valuing youth over maturity (Bartholome et al., 2000; Kaufman & Phua, 2003); (4) describe their own bodies and request certain physical features in their partners, like penis size and musculature (Bartholome et al., 2000; Gudelunas, 2005; Phua, Hopper, & Vazquez, 2002); and (5) make more references to sexual interaction and sex roles, such as “tops” or “bottoms” (Groom &
In sum, ads of MSM demonstrate a “preoccupation with physical appearance, male genitalia, and sexual activity” (Bartholome et al., 2000, p. 318). To the extent that partner requests in ads mirror those in real life, the cleavages in the gay community are very pronounced.

The important conclusion is that not all gay men possess the same levels of personal or social capital to negotiate risk, therefore they have differential agency to do so (Rosengarten, 2000, as cited in Slavin, Richters, & Kippax, 2004; Morin et al., 2003). To this end, safer sex “trade offs” have been demonstrated among men who feel they are at some sort of disadvantage in the dating/sex field: because finding sexual partners is difficult for them, they are less likely to negotiate safer sex if their partner does not want it, because they fear they will lose the sexual encounter. To this end, a recent study suggested that men who felt uncomfortable with their bodies found it difficult to communicate their sexual needs and interests to their partners, including safer sex negotiation (Schooler & Ward, 2006). Given that the personal and social capital in question here is “bestowed” by social factors, the importance of socio-contextual factors in sexual decision-making are again evident (Adam et al., 2000; Adam et al., 2005; Ames, Atchinson, & Rose, 1995; Murray & Adam, 2001). It is important to understand this nature of sex and gay culture as it may have implications for men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives, as discussed next. As Gold (1995) put it, “we need to face up to the possibility that our view of the gay community is too benign, that often how gay men relate to one another may be part of the problem, rather than part of the solution” (p. S17).

2.1.4. The Internet, Gay Culture and Sex Seeking

This section focuses on (1) the impacts of the Internet on gay culture (outside of sex seeking), (2) how the Internet has altered traditional sex seeking processes, and (3) the extant literature on men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes and the gaps therein.

On the first point, the Internet has helped gay men in identity- and community-building and emancipation on local and global scales (Alexander, 2002; Gudelunas, 2005; Heinz, Gu, Inuzuka, & Zender, 2002; Klein & Schwartz, 2004; Wakeford, 1997). The Internet has also been

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6 Colloquial terms: “tops” are the insertive partners in anal intercourse, and “bottoms” are the receptive partners.
shown to play an important role in the coming-out process, particularly for young adults. Bond et al. (in press), for example, note that in their sample of 56 lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals in Midwestern USA, an “overwhelming majority of participants noted using the Internet for information during the coming-out process.” They found more generally that these younger adults were more likely to turn to media as sources of information about coming-out rather than interpersonal relationships. In their study of same-sex attracted youth in Australia, Hillier and Harrison (2007) found that the Internet helped these adolescents experiment with their sexuality online without consequence to their offline lives, learn about the physical aspects of same-sex sexual relations, and learn about being part of a gay community. They concluded that while cyberspace did not replace the physical worlds of their participants, it allowed them “to gain confidence online in a space which they argue is easier to negotiate when they are exploring their sexual feelings” (p. 95).

As also discussed earlier, the Internet helps facilitate not only social connections within the gay community, but also socialization into it. Brown and colleagues (2005) noted that the Internet is a place where gay men can meet and socialize without fear of negative social consequences. For men already established in a gay scene, the Internet is an efficient way of expanding social networks. For men new(er) to the scene, the Internet provides a place for socialization, where men learn about the gay scene, about “being gay,” and build networks of other gay friends (see also Gudelunas, 2005; Sanders, 2008). Such a situation may work both for and against HIV prevention efforts, a point developed throughout this study.

It is not surprising, then, that the Internet has been adopted as a tool for sex seeking among gay men. In so doing, it alters the traditional methods of sex seeking. First, the Internet introduces new convenience to the sexual quest. Seeking sex through the Internet means that men no longer need to attend gay venues to do so; instead, they can find partners essentially from home (Gudelunas, 2005; Brown et al., 2005; Shernoff, 2006), privately and anonymously (Flowers et al., 1999). This also means that sex seeking online is a safer environment than, for instance, seeking sex in public spaces. Thus the Internet trumps even the convenience and safety advantages that bathhouses introduced. This may also mean that more non-gay-identified men may seek and find sex than before, as they no longer need to travel to unsafe or “gay” locations to find male partners (e.g., Ross, Månsson, Daneback, & Tikkanen, 2005).
The Internet also presents a more efficient method of sex seeking. Web-based personal ads or chatroom profiles allow men to state exactly what it is they are looking for in a partner and/or sexual encounter. At the same time, it allows sex seekers to find and focus directly on men whom they are interested in, such as those who share compatible sex roles, similar fetishes, and so on (Brown et al., 2005; Gudelunas, 2005; Holleran, 2006; Shernoff, 2006). This approach is a much more efficient and convenient system than trying to locate specific partners in “offline” venues. In these ways, sexual encounters may be subject to fewer misunderstandings. Further, online “cruising” may give men the courage to approach partners they may not otherwise have done so, rejections may be easier to take in an online environment (Brown et al., 2005; Shernoff, 2006), and it is easier online to shake off unwanted advances (Brown et al., 2005).

Despite these changes, some concerns remain constant, and the Internet is not far removed from social factors of the gay community. For example, work on the actual process of finding sexual partners online repeatedly emphasizes that the body and the visual remain of utmost importance (Jones, 2005; Shaw, 1997). Whether through textual or visual communication, the body is almost always present, if not “the main topic of conversation” (Jones, 2005, p. 74). Most conversations for arranging sex will break down if a photograph and/or video is not exchanged (Jones, 2005; Shaw, 1997), or if it is not considered worthy of attention. This is especially true when numerous partners are being simultaneously considered, and the visual becomes a key method of deciding between them (Shaw, 1997). Thus physical attractiveness remains a key concern even in the online world, reinforcing the earlier discussion on the importance of beauty and the restricted nature of “anonymity” and identity construction online. When the goal of the Internet interaction is an offline sexual meeting, “with pictures, one can no longer take refuge in being a particular desirable social type, but must become an individual” (Jones, 2005, p. 80). Nonetheless, research suggests that minor misrepresentations about identity and body occur online. However, misrepresentations about things such as HIV status appear to be much less common. For instance, Ross et al. (2006) found that the Latino MSM they studied would tell “white lies” in their online interactions, but they were least likely to misrepresent their HIV status.

Thus the Internet alters the sex seeking experience in numerous and important ways. Unfortunately, these changes have not been given sustained analysis in the extant literature on
men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes, an issue taken up after a review of that specific body of literature.

2.1.4.1. MSM and the Use of the Internet for Sexual Purposes

There is a growing research literature on the use of the Internet for sexual purposes among MSM, as well as a smaller literature looking at similar uses among heterosexuals (e.g., Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2006; Ross, Daneback, Mansson, Berglund, & Tikkanen, 2008). Appendix A contains a table that overviews the majority of studies that focus on Internet sex seeking among MSM, published from 2000 to present. Note that some of these studies include MSM in mixed populations of heterosexual men and women, and that multiple articles may refer to the same studies.

The table is organized by year, and as it demonstrates, publications in this field began appearing in earnest in 2003, and have becoming increasingly numerous in recent years, highlighting a growing interest in this particular field of research. While the publications report studies from numerous countries, most are from the USA, as well as Sweden and the United Kingdom; other countries where studies have been conducted include Australia, China, France, and the Netherlands. Some work has been carried out in Canada, including some significant qualitative work, as discussed later.

By and large the focus of the studies has been specifically on populations of MSM, with some specific targeting of young, ethnic or rural MSM. The majority of studies draw upon quantitative measures – mainly surveys, administered both online and offline – although some qualitative work has been carried out, discussed in more depth below. The majority of work has been descriptive in nature, typically describing the characteristics of men who use the Internet for sexual purposes, and comparing sexual and risk behaviours with non-Internet using populations of MSM. A number of studies have specifically sought to assess sexual risk behaviour among MSM who have sex with partners met online; these studies are denoted in the table with the topic “Risk.” Publications denoted in the table with a “Prevention” topic refer to studies that focused specifically on issues related to online HIV prevention intervention, as covered later in this section. A number of publications refer specifically to focusing on MSM who use the Internet to find “barebacking” partners, defined as intentional unprotected anal
intercourse. Finally, a smaller number of studies considered very particular topics, such as Internet addiction, online misrepresentation and online sexual negotiation.

Taken together, the extant literature suggests that (1) MSM are increasingly likely to use the Internet to find sex partners, (2) MSM who seek sex partners online report higher rates of sexual risk behaviour more generally, (3) they report a greater number of previous STIs than men who do not seek sex online, and (4) they tend to report a greater number of previous male sex partners.

Liau, Millet and Marks (2006) undertook a meta-analysis of the extant literature that offers significant findings on men’s use of the Internet to find male sex partners. The meta-analysis included 22 studies with populations of MSM. Studies were included if they recruited MSM, gay or bisexual men (without pooled analyses of non-MSM populations); reported on percentages of MSM seeking sexual partners online; compared sexual behaviour among MSM who do and do not seek sex online; and/or compared sexual behaviour among MSM recruited through online versus offline means.

The meta-analysis suggested that approximately 40% of MSM seek sexual partners through the Internet, and about 30% of MSM have actually had sex with a male partner that they met online. A higher prevalence of unprotected anal intercourse was found among MSM who sought sex online than those who did not; this difference was observed for men engaging both in seroconcordant and serodiscordant sex. It was also suggested that the prevalence of unprotected sex was higher with serodiscordant partners among men who sought sex online. That being said, the authors conclude that a considerable percentage of MSM use the Internet to look for sex partners, and those who do have a riskier sexual behavior profile than their counterparts. The extent to which the Internet may increase risk behavior beyond that which occurs when men meet partners at offline venues remains unclear. (p. 583)

This analysis raises the debate on whether the Internet facilitates riskier sex. One of the first studies to investigate this question explicitly concluded that men were just as likely to engage in unprotected sex with partners met offline and those met online, thus the Internet does not “per se,
create a risk for HIV transmission” (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2005, p. 967). More recent research continues this debate, with some studies suggesting a higher rate of sexual risk behaviour with partners met online (e.g., Berry, Raymond, Kellogg, & McFarland, 2008) while others continue to suggest that there is no elevated risk, or perhaps even a lower risk, of unprotected sex with partners met online among MSM (e.g., Chiasson et al., 2007; Grov, Parsons, & Bimbi, 2007; Horvath, Rosser, & Remafedi, 2008; Mettey, Crosby, DiClemente, & Holtgrave, 2003; Mustanski, 2007; Ogilvie et al., 2008; Rosser, Miner et al., in press; Smith et al., 2006; for another review, see also Chiasson et al., 2006) or among heterosexuals (e.g., Bolding et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2008).

This debate calls into question the role of the Internet in sexual risk behaviour. A pressing question is whether men who engage in higher-risk sex more generally are simply using the Internet as another place to find partners, or whether there is something specific about the Internet that facilitates higher-risk sexual behaviour among MSM. The available evidence suggests the former case. Regardless of this debate, it is clear that unprotected sex does occur among men who meet each other online, warranting further investigation into this practice, especially for implications for HIV prevention. This study aims to contribute further to this debate.

This debate also highlights a gap in the extant literature. There has been little sustained analysis of how the Internet, as a venue for finding sex, may impact risk behaviour within those encounters. The location of sex seeking can influence sexual behaviour in the setting (Binson et al., 2001; Flowers et al., 2000; Flowers & Duncan, 2002; Whittier, Lawrence, & Seeley, 2005), but the existing studies do not explore the Internet as a “location” for finding sex and the potential processes between using the Internet to find offline sexual partners and sexual risk behaviour with those partners.

Further, most studies tend to focus on gay-identified MSM with little attention paid to non-gay-identified MSM and how they may use the Internet to seek sex and the sexual risk behaviour they may subsequently engage in.7 There is evidence that men of different sexual identities have

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7 This, in fact, reflects a larger neglect of non-gay-identified MSM in the HIV/STI literature (Boehmer, 2002; Boulton, 1993; Boulton & Fitzpatrick, 1996; Doll, 1997; Doll, Myers, Kennedy, & Allman, 1997).
different sexual experiences with other men, which may have implications for their online experiences (Agronick et al., 2004; Schindhelm & Hospers, 2004; see also Dubé, 2000). For example, the Internet may facilitate sex which otherwise might not otherwise have occurred among non-gay-identified men. Indeed, Ross and colleagues (2005) suggest that one in 10 men who identify as heterosexual use the Internet to have cybersex with other men. To the extent that cybersex can approximate sex with a man (Tikkanen & Ross, 2003), there is little insight into how heterosexually-identified men may use the Internet to arrange offline meetings with men, and the safety of sexual behaviour in these meetings.

Finally, the majority of studies are quantitative and describe, but fail to analyze, men’s experiences of using the Internet in their sexual lives. Further, most studies neglect theoretical approaches and development which can lend important new insights to the issue. Social theories of risk, for instance, emphasize attending to the social factors which influence risk behaviour (as explored later). However, existing studies give little attention to the Internet-arranged sexual encounter as a social situation and how contextual factors might impact upon safer sex behaviour. Nor has there been investigation into how notions of risk and rationality are socially situated within these encounters (Ingham, 1994; Rhodes, 1997; Rhodes & Quirk, 1998).

In other words, there have been very few attempts to explore how men who use the Internet for sexual purposes engage with sexual risk. Given the earlier discussions about the role of sex in the gay culture and experiences of gay community, the extant literature leaves important questions unanswered and thus there is concern that the “underlying processes” of Internet sex seeking are “incompletely understood” (McFarlane, Ross, & Elford, 2004, p. 929). More work needs to be carried out which better situates men’s use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes within the socio-cultural contexts it is embedded, a key focus of the present study.

Encouragingly, qualitative work from recent years has turned to a broader perspective on men’s experiences online. Work by Balán et al. (2009) and Dowsett et al. (2008), for instance, have focused on the experiences of MSM who specifically seek barebacking partners through the Internet. Other work has considered how MSM use the Internet in their sexual lives more generally (outside of specifically seeking barebacking partners). For instance, Brown’s (2005) work on gay men’s use of the Internet in Perth, Australia, found that gay men used the Internet to meet a broader range of new people, it acted as a socialization tool for information and finding
new friends, it allowed control over presentation of the self and anonymous discussion, and it was a safe location for discussion before meeting, and a source of new experiences. The work of Davis and colleagues (2006a, 2006b) on gay men in London, England, found that “e-dating” allowed men to extend their sexual practices, filter potential partners on numerous criteria, understand the potential partner by working out ambiguities and verifying his identity, market the self in positive ways, manage HIV-status disclosure, and build sexual networks. While these works begin to answer some pertinent questions about partner selection and safer sex negotiation in the online world, they do not situate the practice or risk encountered in sexual situations within larger social contexts.

Despite the lack of quantitative literature from Canada, a number of qualitative studies in this area from Canada have appeared in recent years (Engler, Frigault, Léobon, & Lévy, 2005; Poon et al., 2005; Sanders, 2008). Like the other qualitative work, these studies have sought the perspectives of MSM in their use of the Internet for sexual purposes. Engler and colleagues (2005) studied 22 French-speaking, gay-identified men from Montreal and Quebec City, Quebec. They conducted semi-structured interviews, in French, and analyzed them through interpretive phenomenological analysis. They found that the Internet helped expand men’s social and sexual networks (although not always unambiguously); it played a role in men’s sexual discovery and socialization; and it helped men affirm their gay identities. The general trend among MSM in this study was toward safer sex with partners met online.

Sanders (2008) likewise investigated the meaning and use of chatrooms from the perspectives of the men who use them. Twenty-one gay-identified men in Toronto, Ontario were interviewed through semi-structured interviews with a quasi-grounded theory analysis. Again, findings stressed the socialization aspect of the Internet and the ability to participate in a gay community through cyberspace. It was argued that the Internet afforded gay men a measure of sexual autonomy, although there was some sense of shaming of men for their use of the Internet for sexual purposes.

While these two studies are important for advancing a more qualitative and sociological perspective on the use of the Internet for sexual purposes, there are numerous shortcomings. First, the studies are not explicitly driven by social theory. Second, there is little explicit accounting for the social context of men’s Internet use for sexual purposes. Third, the studies do
not explicitly include the perspectives of non-gay-identified men who use the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes. Finally, there is little explicit attention paid to men’s sexual risk behaviour and implications of the findings for public health and/or HIV prevention, especially in Sanders (2008).

However, the study by Poon and colleagues (2005) is an exception to many of these critiques, and to the critiques of the literature more generally. Poon and colleagues (2005) studied the experiences of East and Southeast Asian men in Toronto who used gay chatrooms. Unlike other studies, the authors offer insight into the context of chatroom use: the Asian men in their study turned to the Internet because they felt they had nowhere else to go; they felt socially isolated; they found the chatrooms safe and anonymous, and a place for which to find support that was unavailable offline. In the chatrooms, they found that larger social stereotypes and notions of male beauty influenced the interactions between users, and many of the men reported turning to finding sex partners on the Internet because of feeling lonely and isolated, and they experienced difficulty in discussing and negotiating safer sex. This finding is instructive:

Boredom and loneliness…were the key factors motivating them to meet their cyber “friends” offline in person. Due to inexperience in dating and in the gay community, feelings of isolation, and desire to date white men, in some cases, participants did not found mutual and equitable relationships with their cyber “friends” when they met these “friends” offline in person: they were persuaded (or some may say, used) for sex even though they might not want to.

(p. 161)

While the authors acknowledge more work is needed in understanding how chatrooms may make Asian men vulnerable to sexual exploitation and how these men negotiate safer sex, this study illustrates exactly how broader social factors influence men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes, and how these factors continue to influence the interaction and sexual negotiations and perhaps lead to unprotected sex.

This is the exact direction research on the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM needs to go, if it is to help inform effective HIV prevention interventions. As earlier, effective HIV prevention requires attention to men’s actual online experiences, and studies which focus on
men’s experiences, and their social contexts, help address this issue. As the same changes which may facilitate risk behaviour can be harnessed for health promotion, research needs to move beyond basic examinations to more sophisticated analyses to help open the “black box” of how MSM use the Internet in their sexual lives (Davis et al., 2006a, p. 459).

2.1.5. Men’s Views on HIV Prevention

This section overviews a small literature that has sought input directly from MSM on their views on how to improve HIV prevention, both online and offline (Hooper, Rosser, Horvath, Oakes, & Danilenko, 2008; Morin et al., 2003; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000). Such inquiry is particularly important if HIV prevention is to engage with men’s own experiences and perspectives on safer sex, and if men are to find HIV prevention resonant in their own lives; as Seal et al. (2000) put it, it is “critical to the development of culturally-appropriate HIV prevention interventions” (p. 6). Despite the importance of this line of inquiry, there is little work in this specific area.

Seal et al. (2000) sought input from an ethnically-diverse sample of young MSM on what they thought was needed to improve HIV prevention. While this study did not consider online HIV prevention specifically, the findings are applicable to HIV prevention initiatives more generally. They found that the men in their study had little desire for HIV prevention that emphasized education about HIV and skills-building; instead, the men talked about the need for HIV prevention to encompass a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality. Particularly noteworthy were the areas that the men said HIV prevention should focus on: psychosocial factors; sexual communication; sexual identity; and developing healthy intimate relationships.

The men in their study desired prevention efforts that helped manage self-development issues, such as dealing with low self-esteem and self-worth, as well as feelings of desperation and hopelessness. They also talked about strategies to help negotiate safer sex in situations of physical arousal or when under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. Issues related to sexual identity were seen as a barrier to intimacy in developing long-term relationships, and there was a demonstrated need for HIV prevention to encompass aspects of STI prevention more generally.

The Seal et al. study made other noteworthy suggestions for the delivery of HIV prevention. Men emphasized the need for efforts to be “fun and comfortable” (p. 15) and to involve peers in the planning and delivery of HIV prevention programs. The men also talked about the
possibility of older MSM acting as mentors for younger MSM, as well as a need for greater support more generally from society and social institutions, including families, schools, and churches. Interestingly, some men also talked about a lack of support from the gay community itself, noting there were many exclusionary sub-groups and cliques, and that the community itself mirrored racism from broader society.

Morin et al. (2003) likewise sought input from MSM in California on why they thought HIV infections were increasing among MSM, and what they thought might be done about it. Their participants suggested that HIV was no longer seen as the threat it once was; there was not as much talk about HIV as before and there is less social support for “staying safe”; and community norms have become more accepting of unprotected sex. The men in the study suggested that HIV prevention should respond to this new landscape by advocating social support and increased communication about HIV; countering the images of HIV presented by drug companies; providing information about the increasing rates of HIV; reinstating safer sex as a social norm; and highlighting the negative effects of HIV infection. Like the findings of Seal et al. (2000), these perspectives are notable as they each go beyond simple, individual-focused information provision about safer sex and instead deal with other concerns, especially more structural issues such as social support and normative change.

While the Morin et al. (2003) and Seal et al. (2000) studies referred to the needs of MSM for HIV prevention more generally, some work has examined men’s perspectives on specific online initiatives for HIV prevention. Very little work has been undertaken in general needs assessments for online HIV prevention in particular (Hooper et al., 2008), a surprising issue given the importance placed on engaging MSM and their experiences in HIV prevention. However, intervention-specific needs assessments have been carried out in other initiatives (e.g., Bowen, Horvath, & Williams, 2007; Mikolajczak, Kok, & Horsers, 2008).

Hooper et al. (2008) undertook a needs assessment of nearly 3000 MSM, recruited through gay.com, on their views on online HIV prevention. They found that MSM would accept highly sexually explicit materials in HIV prevention, and that sites that used sexually explicitly language (e.g., gay-focused sites) were more often used than sites which did not (e.g., governmental public health websites). Particularly interesting were the topic areas men expressed most interest in: sexual health and developing healthy relationships. Demonstrations
on how to use condoms ranked lowest on men’s interest. Men in the study had great interest in communicating with peers and experts in sexual behaviour and homosexuality in the context of a prevention workshop.

Bull, McFarlane and King (2001) surveyed 4601 males and females in North America through an online survey on sexual risk behaviour. Part of this survey sought input in participants’ views on online health promotion. They found that while almost 61% of the sample would use websites to find sexual health information, only 45% would use e-mail for this purpose, and only about one-third would use chatroom participation (p. 668). Although their sample included males and females, this study is significant because it sought participants’ views on the use of the Internet for sexual health promotion, and they also found that MSM in general were more receptive to any of these activities than non-MSM participants.

Finally, Bolding et al. (2004) examined the attitudes of MSM toward online chatroom outreach in a sample of almost 5000 MSM in London, England. They found that men had “broadly favourable” attitudes towards health workers providing outreach in online chatrooms (p. 999): the majority of men agreed that health workers should be allowed into chatrooms, and they would also find out what a health worker had to say. However, the men who agreed with these statements were less likely to report higher-risk sexual behaviour. Thus, such an approach to HIV prevention may not reach those most in need of reaching. Furthermore, their study deals in hypotheticals, and cannot determine whether these men would actually engage a health worker if one actually was available. Nor can this study suggest any behavioural outcomes of such an approach.

In sum, these studies have shed some light on what MSM would like to see in HIV prevention, both online and offline. The next section considers a number of initiatives that are already underway in HIV prevention online.

2.1.6. Online HIV Prevention Initiatives

Given the increasing use of the Internet among MSM to meet sex partners, a number of online HIV prevention initiatives have been undertaken. However, there are very few evaluations of these initiatives. The evaluations that do exist do not suggest much about behavioural outcomes, and those that do address behavioural outcomes do not show any impact, suggesting problems
with the focus and/or delivery of online HIV prevention. These initiatives and evaluations, where available, are overviewed here. Thus far, online HIV prevention efforts can be categorized as follows: (1) information provision; (2) health promotion outreach; (3) partner notification; and (4) online testing.

2.1.6.1. Information Provision

Information provision efforts use various modalities to provide information on a variety of HIV/STI prevention topics. The nature and interactivity of these interventions vary. Mikolajczak et al. (2008), for instance, designed an interactive website called “Queermasters: The Online Gay Health Show.” This program was designed to encourage MSM to get regular sexual health checkups and seek out HIV testing if necessary. The “show” was narrated by an animated “show master” which culled information from the users and presented tailored information. Bull et al. (2004) developed “Smart Sex Quest,” an online initiative which collected information on demographics and sexual risk behaviour and in return offered tailed intervention messages for using condoms with casual partners, testing for STIs, and testing for HIV. Bull et al. (in press) also developed a website called “Keep It Real,” as a part of their “Youthnet” work; like their other effort, this website featured tailored condom-promotion messages delivered through picture and audio.

Bowen et al. (2007; 2008) designed a two-module online intervention aimed at rural MSM. This intervention presented users with an animated vignette of an experienced HIV-positive gay man talking to a less-experienced HIV-negative gay man who had recently had high-risk sex. The content included information about HIV testing, living with HIV, HIV transmission routes, HIV treatment, and condom use. Lau et al. (2008) devised a program aimed at MSM in Hong Kong that had as its backbone the provision of HIV and STI-related information by e-mail, combined with personalized outreach and a telephone support hotline (although the latter two modalities were under-utilized).

Evaluation of these efforts is scant, and where available, is not terribly convincing. The “Smart Sex Quest” intervention by Bull et al. (2004) was designed as an randomized controlled trial (RCT), but with an attrition rate of 84%, conclusions could not be drawn (see also McFarlane, Kachur, Klausner, Roland, & Cohen, 2005). They had more practical success evaluating their “Youthnet” work (Bull, Vallejos, Levine, & Ortiz, 2008). However, they found little evidence
that their “tailored and interactive HIV prevention intervention” had any desired effect (Bull et al., in press). They concluded that there is substantial work to do before we can demonstrate that the Internet and computers have efficacy for affecting HIV Prevention [sic] behaviors among large samples—and that these effects can be sustained over time.

Bowen et al. (2007; 2008) likewise undertook an RCT of their intervention; while it showed that men had significant increases in HIV/AIDS-related knowledge and safer sex attitudes, no behavioural outcomes were identified. Lau et al. (2008) also used an RCT to evaluate their online intervention; their analysis showed no statistically significant differences between their intervention and control groups. The authors suggest that the intervention was ineffective because many of the participants probably already knew the HIV prevention information that was being transmitted; the messages were standardized instead of personalized; and many participants were lost to follow-up. Overall, these evaluation results are not particularly convincing.

2.1.6.2. Personalized Outreach

Another popular method of HIV prevention online has been the use of health workers/educators in chatrooms where men meet sexual partners. Personalized outreach has also been offered by the use of message forums and chats hosted by health professionals.

In response to a syphilis outbreak among MSM in San Francisco, California tied to an online chatroom, the San Francisco Department of Public Health launched targeted discussions via instant messaging and e-mail through a number of different sites where men met sexual partners (Klausner, Levine, & Kent, 2004). This outreach focused specifically on providing information about syphilis symptoms, transmission, and treatment, and where to seek testing. They likewise facilitated moderated online chat sessions, led by an expert, to answer participants’ questions about syphilis (Klausner et al., 2004). AIDS service organizations across the USA use similar outreach in their practices (Benotsch et al., 2006; McFarlane et al., 2005), and there is some use in Canada as well (Sandstra, Gold, Jones, Harris, & Taylor, 2008).
Hallett et al. (2007) undertook a chatroom outreach initiative in Western Australia. Their “CyberReach” project recruited peer educators to “lurk” in chatrooms and provide STI/HIV information and referrals upon request. In the first two of three trials of this outreach, they found lower than expected numbers of interactions, as well as technical problems and a shift of users from the targeted chatroom to another chatroom where their access was not permitted. However, in their third trial, they added an instant messaging component which allowed men to chat with a health worker at a pre-determined time; this attempt garnered more responses.

Rhodes et al. (2004; 2008) undertook a similar outreach project called “Cyber-Based Education and Referral/Men for Men (CyBER/M4M).” In their first attempt at this outreach (Rhodes, 2004), they recruited a peer educator to “lurk” in a chatroom and provide information on a requested basis. The educator provided information about sexual health and testing, as well as strengthening the safer sex norms in the online community. The educator was asked about six central topics during his time in the chatroom: sexual risk reduction strategies; issues related to HIV testing; alternatives for nonsexual social support; referrals for youth; resources for coming-out; and access to risk reduction materials and supplies. The health educator’s conversations appear to have taken place in the public chatroom, unlike other approaches which have relied on “private” chats. Thus the information presented was available to a wider audience. However, as the authors note, they have no way of knowing how many of the chatters in the room actually paid heed to the information being given, and there was no way to track behavioural outcomes.

In a subsequent study (Rhodes et al., 2008), the authors attempted to investigate the differences in demographics and HIV-related risk between men who did and did not engage a health educator in the chatroom. In this iteration, two health educators entered the chatrooms. One educator made himself available to answer questions, as in the earlier intervention; however, this time men were engaged in private chats and after having their questions answered, they were asked to take part in a survey. The other educator advertised only the survey, to create a comparison group. They found that chatters at higher risk for HIV transmission were less likely

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8 “Lurking” refers to passively sitting in chatrooms and waiting to be contacted, as opposed to actively contacting chatroom participants.
to engage with the educator and enroll in the CyBER/M4M program, suggesting a problem with the reach of the intervention.

Moskowitz et al. (in press) devised the “PowerON” program, where trained counselors entered Kansas-specific chatrooms on gay.com to provide sexual health outreach. They analyzed 279 instant messaging sessions between MSM users in the chatroom and the counselors. They found the discussions centred around four main themes: testing; risk-taking behaviours; HIV/STD information; and counseling. While they suggest that “instant message counseling has great potential as a forum for administering facts and answering questions that might lead to decreased risk-taking behavior in MSM,” they do note that their study offered no data on program efficacy, and highlight the fact that it occurred in only one city and there is no comparison between offline means of conveying this information.

Finally, Sandstra et al. (2008) report on a cyber-outreach program in British Columbia, Canada. In this intervention, public health nurses responded to sexual health questions through e-mail and instant messages. Their evaluation suggested that a majority reported that their knowledge of STIs increased through using the service, but an equal number said that their behaviour did or did not change because of the service. Behaviour changes reported included using condoms during oral sex, anal sex and in low-risk circumstances. However, there was no indication of the sustainability of these changes and the “success” of this behaviour change is questionable (i.e., does promoting condom use in low-risk circumstances develop a healthy sexuality?).

In sum, although personalized chatroom outreach is a popular method of online HIV prevention, there is little evaluation data available to suggest its efficacy (McFarlane et al., 2005). Evaluation is particularly important in light of findings that high-risk men are not accessing the resources. Further, these interventions are particularly demanding on time and staff resources, and are antithetical to the use of the Internet as an efficient and cost-effective method of HIV prevention delivery (Noar, Black, & Pierce, 2009).

2.1.6.3. Partner Notification and Online Testing

The Internet has also been used for notifying partners of a potential exposure to an STI or HIV, as well as for online testing. These two uses are discussed together here because while they are
part of a comprehensive HIV prevention strategy, they are different in nature from the above two approaches to online intervention.

Partner notification is important to HIV prevention to help men know that they may have been exposed to an STI or HIV, and to get tested accordingly, with the aim of preventing further spread of the infection (Mimiaga, Fair et al., 2008). The use of the Internet for partner notification is gaining in popularity, and may be an essential way of reaching men who would otherwise be difficult to reach (Vest, Valadez, Hanner, Lee, & Harris, 2007). There is suggestion that MSM are generally receptive to such a method of partner notification, both for notifying partners and being notified (Mimiaga, Fair et al., 2008; Mimiaga, Tetu et al., 2008). Indeed, such programs are in use across the USA (McFarlane et al., 2005) as well as in Canada and other countries (Levine, Woodruff, Mocello, Lebrija, & Klausner, 2008). The “inSPOT” program, developed in San Francisco, is now in use in Toronto and Ottawa. This program allows people to disclose STI/STD diagnoses to their previous partners through e-mailed postcards (Levine et al., 2008).

Online testing refers to a process whereby men can visit a website, receive a requisition slip and unique ID number for testing, and attend at a lab to have specimens taken and analyzed. Men can then revisit the website after a certain amount of time and find the result of their test by using their unique identification number (Klausner et al., 2004; McFarlane et al., 2005). Men also receive counseling and other relevant information through this website. While evidence of the efficacy of these programs is scant, the evidence that does exist suggests that online screening for syphilis is at least as effective (Levine, Scott, & Klausner, 2005) or perhaps even more effective (Koekenbier, Davidovich, van Leent, Thiesbrummel, & Fennema, 2008), than traditional offline screening.

As this review has shown, there are a limited number of ways in which the Internet has been used to provide HIV interventions. Overall, there is a sense that the online interventions simply “import” offline methods of health promotion. As Rietmeijer and McFarlane (2009) have similarly noted, such initiatives reflect “Web 1.0” efforts that fail to exploit the unique potential of the Internet as an interactive technology. To this end, many of the current iterations of online interventions are based at the individual level, and they are mostly aimed at providing information about STI and HIV transmission, testing, and sexual safety. Evaluations of these
approaches, where available, are not convincing on the efficacy of the behavioural outcomes of these interventions, rendering them “‘proof of concept’ at best” (Rietmeijer & McFarlane, 2008, p. 770).

What is particularly interesting is that the initiatives undertaken thus far have been at odds with what men themselves say they are looking for with respect to HIV prevention. As detailed in the previous section, MSM say they are looking for more comprehensive HIV prevention, which moves beyond simple HIV prevention to broader issues that complicate their sexual lives (Hooper et al., 2008; Morin et al., 2003; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000).

On the whole, the interventions discussed thus far have not directly addressed these issues in any meaningful way. Although the work by Rhodes (2004) alludes to a broader approach to normative change through chatroom outreach, it is difficult to establish whether or not this has actually occurred. However, interventions such as that of Hallett et al. (2007) and Rhodes et al. (2004; 2008) are innovative in that they have used peer leaders to provide their interventions, which has been shown to be useful in delivering HIV prevention (Kelly, 2004; Kelly et al., 1997), and accord with what men in the needs assessment discussed previously desire in interventions. Nonetheless, it is important for online HIV prevention to take a more comprehensive approach to prevention, especially to address the issues that men say are important to them.

This review has overviewed a number of literatures relevant to the study topic, and it also identified gaps in the substantive literature on how MSM use the Internet in their sexual lives. This study aimed to address some of those gaps, and the theory and methods guiding this study as discussed in the next chapters.
Chapter 3
Theoretical Framework

3.1. A Theoretical Fit for the Study

This chapter details the theoretical framework for this study, the research questions and objectives of the study, and the role of theory in shaping those questions and objectives.

As noted in the preceding chapters, this study was prompted by the coming together of two main issues: (1) a need to understand more about the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM and (2) a call from the HIV prevention literature for a greater understanding of men’s own sexual behaviour. A review of the extant literature identified a gap in the use of social theory for investigating these experiences and considering their socially-situated nature. Two “variants” of symbolic interactionism lent themselves well to precisely this line of inquiry: “structural interactionism” (Eakin & MacEachen, 1998) and social theories of risk. These are two complementary theoretical approaches that can encompass men’s perspectives on their use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes, investigate how this use is situated within their broader social and sexual lives, and provide insight into sexual risk behaviour.

These theories are outlined below. Following the overview of these perspectives, there is an outline of how the theoretical perspectives related to the study questions and objectives. As is often the case in qualitative research, the theoretical perspective evolved in tandem with modifications to the purpose of the study, and this progression is discussed in more detail at the close of this section.

3.1.1. Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is the theoretical foundation of the two perspectives used in this study: “structural interactionism” (Eakin & MacEachen, 1998) and social theories of risk. It is difficult to summarize the whole of symbolic interactionist history and thought here, thus the emphasis in this section is a basic introduction to the theory with a discussion of concepts most relevant to the present study.

The symbolic interactionist approach is centrally concerned with the role of interaction in social actors’ experiences in the social world (Charon, 1998). Blumer (1969), through his adaptation of
the ideas of George Herbert Mead, is most often credited with being the “father” of contemporary symbolic interactionist theory (Ritzer, 2000; Wallace & Wolf, 1999). In Blumer’s view, the symbolic interactionist approach is comprised of three propositions:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.

2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society.

3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters. (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, pp. 209-212)

Thus the perspective is centrally concerned with how individuals think, interact, learn meanings and symbols, and make choices based on those meanings (Longmore, 1998; Prus, 1996; Ritzer, 2000). The “definition of the situation” is a central concept, developed from the classic dictum, “If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928/1970, p. 572). In this respect, social actors are active in defining their environment, as opposed to merely responding to it passively (Charon, 1998; Wallace & Wolf, 1999). The process of socialization is also central here, as it is through socialization that individuals learn the meaning of those symbols used in interaction (Ritzer, 2000).

Symbolic interactionism is also concerned with how individuals develop “selves” and identities, namely through their interactions with other social actors (Charon, 1998). The work of Cooley (1902) was particularly influential here, with his notion of the “looking-glass self” – that individuals understand their own self through their beliefs of how others perceive them (in other words, a reflection). As Cooley put it, the looking-glass self is comprised of three elements: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his [sic] judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley, 1902, p. 121). Taking this notion further, Blumer (1969) spoke about the importance in symbolic interaction of “taking the role of the other” – which again refers to interaction based upon an individual’s understanding of the other’s perspectives in that interaction.
Work in this area was continued by Erving Goffman (1959) with his interest in the “dramaturgical self” and especially the “presentation of self.” The introduction to his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), outlines the gist of his theoretical stance, clearly informed by a symbolic interactionist concern with constructing meaning within social interaction:

> When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him [sic] or to bring into play information about him already possessed....Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him. (p. 1)

Accordingly, Goffman was concerned with “impression management” – the strategies through which individuals can manipulate how other individuals perceive them. Two central concepts in impression management are Goffman’s notions of “front” and “back” stage regions. “Front” regions refer to social actor’s performances to “define the situation for those who observe the performance” (p. 22). In the “front” region, actors must show that their performance “maintains and embodies certain standards” expected of that region (p. 107). On the other hand, it is in the “back” region where “the impression fostered by the performance [in the ‘front’] is knowingly contradicted” (p. 112). Central to this process of impression management is the “expressiveness of the individual” through two different measures:

> The expression that he [sic] gives, and the expression that he gives off. The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols....The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor [italics in original]. (p. 2)
While this discussion is far from a complete exploration of Goffman’s theories, it does highlight some concepts which are useful for analyzing the experiences of men in their online sexual search, as explored in chapter 6.

Although the symbolic interactionist perspective has been influential in research in medical sociology and the sociology of health, it is not without its shortcomings. A major criticism of symbolic interactionism centres on its perspective on social structure: while social structures exist, they should not be understood to have a deterministic effect on individuals’ behaviour (Wallace & Wolf, 1999). For this reason, interactionism has been critiqued for shifting focus away from the actual influences of these broader structures on individual action and interaction (Ritzer, 2000). Thus the discussion turns to an attempt to address this issue.

3.1.2. Structural Interactionism

The notion of “structural interactionism” responds to a long-standing dilemma in sociological foci: interactionist work that does not account for structural issues and, conversely, structural work that does not account for interactional issues (Ritzer, 2000). To this end, there have been proposals for a more comprehensive sociological perspective which can overcome these dichotomies. Silverman (1985), for example, argued for a synthesis of macro and micro relations. In his view, sound sociological analysis requires accounting for both interaction and structure:

A narrow concern with social structures precludes a proper understanding of the processes of interpretation through which they are reproduced and, sometimes, changed. Conversely, interactional sociology has constantly to be aware of the real structures which constrain and enable social action. (Silverman, 1985, p. 77)

In a similar way, Stryker (1980) also proposed a theoretical integration of structure and interaction:

A satisfactory theoretical framework must bridge social structure and person, must be able to move from the level of the person to
that of large-scale social structure and back again….a focus on the person without a correlative focus on social structure, or vice versa, is necessarily partial and incomplete….If the social person is shaped by interaction, it is social structure that shapes the possibilities for interaction and so, ultimately, the person. Conversely, if the social person creatively alters patterns of interaction, those altered patterns can ultimately change social structure. (pp. 53, 66)

Both authors make two important observations. First, they recognize that social interactions should not be considered without taking into account the larger social structural factors that can influence those interactions. Second, they importantly acknowledge that it is through social interactions that those social structural factors may be reproduced. Therefore, it is necessary to approach an interactional study with an eye to broader factors that can influence those social interactions but to also consider the ways in which those interactions can feed back into those structures.

Drawing from this approach, Eakin and MacEachen (1998) proposed a synthesis of interaction and structure they termed “structural interactionism.” This approach marries symbolic interactionism with structuralism, by focusing on interaction and meaning (as per symbolic interactionism) within broader social-cultural factors (as per structuralism). The result, as Eakin and MacEachen put it, is an understanding of meaning as socially constructed and bound, rather than a product of individual, psychological processes. In their work on illness and injury in small workplaces, they “used the workers’ accounts of their work and their health to explore the relationship between broader social structures and subjective experience” (p. 900).

For instance, they found that workers’ understandings of health and safety (subjective experiences) could be mediated by their perceptions of relations with management (structure). One illustration they offer of this point are the stories of two different workers with a similar workplace related injury. The worker who perceived good social relations with management in his workplace accounted for his injury as “part of the job” and he was concerned about the impact of his injury on the business. On the other hand, the worker who had a strained relationship with management saw the injury as a result of poor equipment and poor training
provided by the business. In a similar way, this present study was interested in how men’s experiences with using the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes and their sexual risk behaviour could be understood with reference to the men’s broader social experiences. This approach is implicit in the social theories of risk that underlie this study, as discussed next.

3.1.3. Social Theories of Risk

Unlike early work on the sociology of risk, such as that by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), which focused on macro, political perspectives on risk, social theories of risk seek to consider the notion of “risk” from an interactionist viewpoint, with consideration of the contextual factors of that interaction. Social theories of risk, therefore, are an example of linking interaction and structure with a specific focus on the notion of “risk.”

This perspective arose out of critiques of the dominant psychological theories of sexual behaviour, like the health belief model and the transtheoretical model, which tend to view risk as something that is objective, easily measurable, and easily containable (Rhodes, 1995). Such theories also tend to neglect contextual influences on risk perception and management, assume a linear model of risk decision-making, and emphasize “rationality” in risk behaviour (see, e.g., Bloor, 1995b; Davies et al., 1993; Flowers et al., 1999; Kippax & Crawford, 1993; Rhodes, Stimson, & Quirk, 1996; Rhodes, 1997; van Campenhoudt, Cohen, Guizzardi, & Hausser, 1997; van Campenhoudt, 1999; Wright, 1998).

Conversely, social theories of risk promote a very different conceptualization of risk and risk-taking. First, there is growing recognition that efforts in understanding risk must acknowledge the situated nature of risk (Flowers & Duncan, 2002; Moatti & Souteyrand, 2000; Sandfort, 1995; Wright, 1998). From this perspective, it is imperative that research seek to investigate and understand how people experience and engage “risk” with respect to other risks, costs, benefits and meanings associated with that risk (Flowers & Duncan, 2002; Rhodes, 1995; Hart & Boulton, 1995; Parker & Carballo, 1990). Risk cannot be understood as an objective and calculable phenomenon, but rather as something that is pliable and negotiated in the social contexts within which people engage in risk behaviour.

Second, social risk theories acknowledge the need to understand more fully how social contexts can influence and impact sexual decision-making and risk behaviour (Aggleton, 1995). This is
especially true with sexual behaviour, of course, where sexual decision-making is not a sole
decision, but rather takes place with one—or more—partners. Studies of risk behaviour must
therefore account for the interactional processes in which risk behaviour does or does not occur
(Flowers & Duncan, 2002; Ingham, 1994; Ingham & van Zessen, 1997; van Campenhoudt, 1999;
Wright, 1998). Indeed, as discussed earlier, the sexual encounter is structured by issues of power
and agency in sexual decision-making, which are linked to larger social factors (Bloor, 1995b,
1995a; Davies et al., 1993; Davies, 1994; Hart & Boulton, 1995; Moatti, Hauser, & Agrafotis,
1997). However, such notions of social context are not captured in the social-psychological
models which is problematic because the capacity to negotiate safer sex can vary greatly,
dependent on the partner and situation within which the sex occurs (Flowers et al., 1999; Davies,
1994; Wright, 1998).

Third, social risk theories emphasize the ways in which individuals can rationalize risk.
Psychological models tend to assume a single rationality, where it is assumed that individuals
will objectively calculate information about HIV risk based on the “facts” and make their
behavioural decisions accordingly (Bajos, 1997; Flowers et al., 1999; Moatti & Souteyrand,
2000; Rhodes, 1995; Rhodes et al., 1996). This approach again denies the ways in which
individuals situate and negotiate risk. For example, Ingham and colleagues (1994; 1997) found
that participants in their study reported four different understandings of “rationality” within their
sexual encounters. Similarly, in a study on injection drug users, Rhodes (1997) observed that
the risks of unprotected sex were of lower importance than the perceived benefits of enhanced
sexual pleasure and displaying commitment and trust in their relationships (see also van
Campenhoudt, 1999).

Further, externally-imposed meanings of rationality deny the ways in which individuals make
decisions that are rational to them. As Davies (1994) importantly observes, what is decidedly
“rational” is a process: MSM who engage in risk behaviour can do so in ways they consider
perfectly rational, although these legitimations may not accord with those of public health (see

9 The participants reported sexual situations where rationality was (1) known but unattainable, where safer sex
negotiation was beyond their volitional control; (2) not a feasible option, a disbelief that rationality was possible in
sexual encounters; (3) defined by relationships, where what was considered “rational” differed by contexts and
settings; and (4) deliberately suspended, choosing to ignore “rational” action (Ingham, 1994; Ingham & van Zessen,
1997).
also Sandfort, 1995; Bastard & Cardia-Vonèche, 1997; Moatti et al., 1997); indeed, “unsafe sex is not irrational, but a different sort of rationality” (Davies et al., 1993, p. 53). One must therefore be careful when talking about “irrational” behaviour, as such a view ignores the perspective of the risk taker (see also Gastaldo et al., in press; Slavin et al., 2004). Thus Davis (2002), speaking about HIV interventions, is instructive: “There may be a case for less ‘facts’ directed at the actuarial subject a move to forms of intervention derived from the knowledges, rationalities, and meanings [italics added] that circulate in discourse about sex and risk” (p. 295).

Finally, social risk theories move beyond the traditional “knowledge, attitude, belief, practice” (KABP) model that suggests increased knowledge about HIV/AIDS alters attitudes and beliefs towards preventive behaviour, which then results in preventive behaviour. The fact that HIV rates are rising among gay men show this viewpoint to be naïve: gay men—and others, for sure—continue to expose themselves to HIV risk even with full knowledge about HIV and safer sex. To be sure, studies which focus only on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour cannot account for how sexual and risk behaviour are “understood and lived” (Aggleton, 1995, p. 60). In short, it is difficult to identify a cause-and-effect relationship between knowledge, attitudes and behaviour (Bastard & Cardia-Vonèche, 1997).

Social risk theories emerged from these critiques. Situated rationality theory suggests that rationality is dependent on context, thus what is deemed “rational” behaviour can vary by the situation. In this way, risk is “socially organised” and it depends on what is or is not considered socially acceptable in a situation, given broader social norms, as well as the meanings and values attached to risk behaviour within that situation (Rhodes & Quirk, 1998; Bloor, 1995a; Gagnon, 2000). Nonetheless, risk behaviour is still considered within an individual’s domain (Rhodes, 1995).

On the other hand, social action theories of risk recognize the role of social interaction in risk behaviour (Rhodes, 1995, 1997; Rhodes et al., 1996). Here, risk becomes the product of “negotiated actions” between two or more people (Rhodes, 1997, p. 216). In this view, risk behaviour results from social interactions, and these social interactions, as well as individual perceptions, are influenced by social context and norms. Importantly, this perspective acknowledges that what is considered individual “choice” is actually a result of the interplay of
all of these factors, and that choices may not necessarily be calculated. It also importantly recognizes that risk behaviour may become an everyday, habituated and mundane activity (Rhodes, 1997). This perspective helps move beyond the limitations of the more individual-focused models.

The significance of this theoretical perspective is eloquently stated by Rhodes (1997) in his work in a social risk understanding of HIV risk behaviour among injection drug users:

> Behaviours which are…considered epidemiologically ‘risky’ may be viewed in different terms by drug users themselves….In the absence of understanding how drug users perceive and behave in response to risk, researchers will fail in their endeavour to appreciate fully why it is that drug users behave as they do, and why it is that they may continue to engage in behaviours they know to carry a risk of HIV. Understanding the social organisation [sic] of risk behaviour does not merely complement conventional epidemiological understanding, it also questions it. (p. 223)

Although Rhodes is referring here to drug users, the sentiment can apply to sexual risk behaviour as well. The social risk perspective is important to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how MSM engage with risk in the situations within which “risk behaviour” is a possibility.

### 3.1.4. Progression of Study Purpose and Theory

As discussed in the next section, the initial purpose of the study was originally quite narrow, focusing only on sexual risk in sexual encounters that MSM had arranged online. An obvious theoretical choice for this issue was social risk theory. This approach would facilitate investigation into how men’s perceptions of sexual risk in the Internet-arranged sexual encounter were influenced by the nature of that encounter as well as their interactions and experiences, both online and offline.

However, it became apparent that the study purpose needed to be broadened in order to produce a larger picture of the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM. Indeed, it was quite possible that, with this broader focus, some men in the sample may not have actually met other
men for offline sexual encounters. Thus interest in the study began to encompass not only the Internet-arranged sexual encounter, but also how the men’s Internet use for any sexual purpose was situated within the men’s social and sexual lives. The theoretical perspective therefore needed to account not only for the socially-situated nature of sexual risk, but also the socially-situated nature of the Internet use itself and men’s interactions therein. It was also necessary to, again, address men’s interactions and experiences as they related to the meaning of their Internet use.

Thus, symbolic interactionism—the foundation of social risk theories—became an overarching and adjunct perspective for considering the broader research issue. Symbolic interactionism would focus the investigation on men’s interactions online and offline and how they related to their understandings of the Internet in their sexual lives. For men who did meet men offline for sexual encounters, social theories of risk would then be a natural lens for considering aspects of sexual risk.

While the symbolic interactionist focus on interaction and meaning was important for investigating men’s own perspectives on the role of the Internet in their sexual lives, it was also important to account for the men’s social worlds and how they intersected with their use of the Internet for sexual purposes. Thus the “structural interactionist” approach was adopted from Eakin and MacEachen (1998).

In sum, it was necessary for the theoretical perspective to encompass both the Internet use for same-sex sexual purposes and sexual risk in the Internet-arranged sexual encounter. It was further necessary for the theoretical perspective to situate both within the social realm. In the end, the structural interactionist perspective, combined with social theories of risk, permit this focus, as illustrated in Figure 1.
3.2. Research Questions

The research questions driving this study reflect the gaps identified and issues raised in the preceding review of the relevant literature. They were also informed by symbolic interactionism and social risk theory.

This study had two driving research questions which grew out of the concerns in HIV prevention at present, identified earlier: (1) a need for HIV prevention to be more responsive to men’s own experiences and (2) a need to investigate men’s actual experiences in using the Internet for sexual purposes. Accordingly, the first research question was “How do MSM use the Internet in their sexual lives?” The second research question of the study was “What insight can men’s experiences of using the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes provide for HIV prevention?”

The first research question was kept broad as to not take too narrow an approach to investigating the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM. When the study was first proposed, the focus was specifically on how MSM use the Internet for sex-seeking, defined as meeting a male partner online for an offline sexual encounter. However, it was decided later that this focus might be too restrictive to capture the breadth of how a broader range of MSM might use the Internet to explore their same-sex sexual interests. Thus the research question was reconfigured.
to encompass men’s sexual lives more generally, rather than a narrow emphasis on only sex-seeking.

In these ways, the research questions sought to investigate the range of ways MSM, both gay and non-gay-identified, use the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes. From an HIV prevention standpoint, this broader perspective is important to investigate how experiences outside of simply looking for sex online may influence risk understandings and sexual behaviour among MSM, hence the second research question.

Overall, the research questions were designed to meet two goals. The first goal was to respond to the calls in the HIV prevention literature for greater attention to men’s own perspectives on their use of the Internet in their sexual lives. The second goal was to bring sociological theory to bear on the issue, to provide a new perspective on HIV prevention that acknowledges the socially-situated nature of men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes and the potential implications for sexual risk perception and behaviour.

3.3. Research Objectives

The study research objectives were proposed to investigate the research questions as well as to respond to gaps in the literature previously identified in the literature review.

(1) Describe how MSM use the Internet for sexual purposes.

This objective investigated how this sample of MSM used the Internet for sexual purposes, beyond the obvious use of looking for sex partners for offline encounters. It is an important objective because it can shed light on how other sexual uses of the Internet may play a role in shaping understandings of sexual risk and how sexual encounters in the offline world may unfold.

(2) Investigate how men’s use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes is situated within their broader social and sexual lives.

This objective is important because it responds to one of the main gaps identified in the scholarship in this particular area: a lack of understanding of how the Internet fits with the broader social and sexual lives of MSM. If HIV prevention is to respond appropriately to men’s
experiences, there needs to be a greater understanding of and accounting for the contextual factors influencing those experiences. This objective specifically investigated intersections between interaction and structure; that is, how men’s online interactions are situated within their broader social experiences. In other words, it sought to investigate the contexts within which men use the Internet for sexual purposes.

(3) Examine the intersections of men’s Internet use for sexual purposes, the contexts of that use, and their management of sexual risk.

This objective draws directly from social risk perspectives. As above, it is likewise important as it calls attention to how sexual risk is a negotiable and malleable understanding, influenced by factors beyond the sexual encounter. It focused specifically on how contextual influences influence the men’s risk perceptions and behaviour in sexual encounters. Again, like objective #2, this objective considered how sexual interactions are situated within broader structural factors.

(4) Investigate men’s views towards online HIV prevention efforts.

This objective is important as a first step to understanding what men who are online for sexual purposes would like to see in online HIV prevention. It is an objective aimed at formative research (Atkin & Freimuth, 2001) for the development of innovative prevention strategies which address men’s own input, along the lines of similar work which has sought the direct input from MSM on directions for HIV prevention (e.g., Hooper et al., 2008; Morin et al., 2003; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000).

Taken together, findings from each of these objectives provide insight into HIV prevention initiatives which reflect men’s actual experiences online, and acknowledge the socially-situated nature of those experiences. These objectives relate to the calls mentioned previously, that HIV prevention needs to account for the emic perspective, especially how it relates to men’s real experiences in cyberspace and their ensuing “offline” extensions.

Through these objectives, this study contributes to the substantive, theoretical and methodological literature. This study is particularly significant as it is one of the first studies to investigate men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes with a focus on understanding this use
as it is linked to the men’s subjective experiences in their social contexts. It is exactly this nature of inquiry which responds to the calls in the HIV prevention literature identified earlier: greater examination of men’s own perspectives of their sexual behaviour, and how their sexual behaviour is situated within their social contexts.

3.4. Theory and the Research Question and Objectives

The study research questions and objectives were designed to respond to the lack of a more socially-situated perspective on the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM. The overarching research questions (and related objectives) focused on men’s experiences of using the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes and what insight an analysis of those experiences can provide for innovative HIV prevention. These questions and objectives are clearly informed by structural interactionist and social risk theories.

First, the questions are driven by a focus on how MSM use the Internet for sexual purposes. This focus pertains to men’s *interactions* with other men, both online and offline. Thus in studying men’s experiences, consideration should be given to their interactions, their definitions of the situation, and their presentations of self. As stated before, social action does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is structured by the social, contextual and cultural settings within which it occurs. Thus, it is important to situate these interactions within their social context, hence the importance of the structural interactionist perspective, which begins to account for the social context.

The focus on interaction and structure is then carried onto the consideration of the sexual encounter itself. Here, social risk theories are used to recognize that efforts in understanding risk must acknowledge its situated nature (Flowers & Duncan, 2002; Moatti & Souteyrand, 2000; Sandfort, 1995; Rhodes, 1997; Rhodes et al., 1996; Wright, 1998). Social risk theory is imperative here, as it acknowledges that men’s perceptions and management of risk cannot be divorced from the socio-contextual factors in which they are embedded. Following social action theories, the overarching interest in this study is how structural factors (e.g., men’s sexual and social lives) shape men’s subjective experiences (e.g., their use of the Internet for sexual purposes; their sexual risk perceptions). As Rhodes (1995) rightly observes, “only by investigating behaviour as an *interactive process* is it possible to glean how interaction gives
such behaviour a ‘meaningful dimension’…it is necessary to understand how risk is a *situated phenomenon* [italics added]” (p. 131).

The theories used in this study are particularly important because each take the analysis beyond the individual and acknowledge the contextual influences on the individual. Both are also consistent with the ethnographic approach of this study (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Prus, 1996), as detailed in the methodology chapter, which follows.
4.1. The Qualitative Approach

Qualitative methods were most relevant to this study for numerous reasons. First, the theoretical framework, research questions and research objectives focus on investigating men’s online and offline interactions, as well as how those interactions and experiences are situated within larger social concerns, questions which are best addressed through more micro-oriented approaches. The qualitative approach is also a natural complement to the guiding symbolic interactionist framework of this study (Prus, 1996). Furthermore, qualitative methods are well-suited to responding to the call of understanding men’s experiences for the purposes of informing HIV prevention initiatives that are responsive to those experiences.

Qualitative methods have a history in HIV/AIDS research (Kotarba, 1990; Parker, 1995; Power, 1998, 2002), although they may not be as widely known or recognized as their quantitative counterparts. For example, qualitative research in HIV/AIDS has identified and described important behavioural and lifestyle factors involved with HIV transmission, enhanced understandings of HIV/AIDS risk perception, and has been used in formative and process evaluations of HIV/AIDS interventions (Power, 1998). Qualitative methods are particularly relevant to the study of sexual behaviour, as they move beyond questions of quantification to questions of how and why behaviours occur, importantly, from the perspective of the actor (Patton, 2002; Power, 1998, 2002). Qualitative approaches to studying sexual behaviour can begin to investigate questions of meanings, understandings, rationales and contexts of sexual negotiation, decision-making and risk behaviour in ways that survey questions cannot (Ingham, 1994; Patton, 2002; Pope & Mays, 1995; Power, 1998, 2002; Rhodes, 1995; Rhodes et al., 1996). As Power (1998) notes, qualitative research uncovers the “subtlety and complexity of HIV-related behaviours and the importance of lifestyle and culture in determining crucial factors, such as risk and negotiation” (p. 687). Research methods should align with the research question and theoretical underpinnings (Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002), thus qualitative methods are an excellent complement to inquiry into the issues of interest in this study.
4.2. Research Design

Given the overarching interest in how MSM use the Internet for sexual purposes and how this use is embedded within its social context, an ethnographic approach was adopted for this study. Ethnography is a long-established qualitative approach, which is concerned with a deep understanding of a specific culture. Ethnographies tend to take a holistic approach to understanding how behaviour occurs within its specific contexts, emphasize reflexivity on the part of the researcher, and focus on the “emic” or insider’s view of the situation (Boyle, 1994). Traditional ethnographies, rooted in the anthropological tradition, featured prolonged engagement with an unfamiliar—usually “primitive” or “exotic”—culture (Boyle, 1994; Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002), and they typically used participant observation methods (Boyle, 1994).

However, more modern ethnographies focus on contemporary social problems and issues, like poverty, education, and addictions (Patton, 2002). Such ethnographies—referred to variously as “focused” (Morse & Richards, 2002; Morse, 1991), “particularistic” (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987), or “applied” (Chambers, 2000)—use ethnographic methods to study any isolatable social group, to understand how culture, norms and values relate to behaviour within their social contexts (Boyle, 1994). These ethnographies tend to utilize a broader range of data collection methods, such as interviews and focus groups, in addition to participant observation (Morse & Richards, 2002). Such an approach would be relevant to studying the socially-situated nature of men’s use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes, given their shared practices and experiences in doing so. Regardless of the approach, it is important that ethnographic works go beyond description, and focus on “pragmatic outcomes for theory and practice” (Boyle, 1994, p. 169), perhaps especially the case with health research.

Ethnography is useful for studying sexual behaviour because the approach studies behaviour within its socio-cultural context, thus it can investigate how sexual behaviour is tied to or influenced by cultural norms (Clatts & Sotheran, 2000). Such an approach helps uncover the complexities of sexual behaviour and understanding relationships which might not be discovered through other methodologies (Clatts & Sotheran, 2000). Some argue that participant observation is a requirement for ethnographic enterprise (e.g., Power, 2002), while others disagree (Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002). However, in making such a decision, the focus of the research
should be considered. Participant observation would be useful for studying locations where sexual interactions are arranged (such as a bathhouse or chatroom) to begin to understand the larger contextual influences at work. Nonetheless, other methods would certainly be required to investigate the actual perspectives of those involved in the sexual encounter.

Where the focus of interest is a sexual encounter, participant observation might be problematic. First, gaining entrée to sexual interactions would be challenging, and the presence of a researcher would undoubtedly alter that interaction. It may be easy to witness sexual interactions within public sex environments such as bathhouses or parks, especially where audiences are welcomed or desired, but the presence of an unidentified researcher poses ethical issues, as Humphreys’ (1975) study showed. Nor would such observation help answer the deeper contextual questions. As a solution, some have carried out research by engaging themselves in sexual interactions with their research participants (e.g., Bolton, 1992; McLelland, 2002; Styles, 1979). Certainly, the ethics of such an approach are questionable (Seal, Bloom, & Somlai, 2000), and the quality of the data produced may be overtly biased, given a researcher’s involvement in an intense, emotional relationship with the participant. Second, such engagement would offer little insight into the contextual factors involved with the behaviour therein. Again, these data are best reached by more direct methods, such as interviews, as discussed shortly.

This study was designed as a “focused ethnography” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 53), an approach that aims to “evaluate or to elicit information on a special topic or shared experience [italics added]” among participants who share certain features (p. 53). In this case, the special topic is the use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes among MSM, with the participants sharing the common experiences of same-sex sexual relations as well as their use of the Internet to facilitate those relations. Importantly, following the research questions and objectives, the ethnographic approach permitted an investigation of the experience as it is embedded in its social context, and how contextual factors may shape that experience. Consistent with focused ethnographic inquiry, data collection took place through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with MSM who use the Internet for sexual purposes. The particulars of sampling, recruitment, data collection, and analysis are detailed below.
4.2.1. Definitions

Before proceeding it is prudent to define some of the terms that have been used thus far and will be used through this dissertation.

4.2.1.1. Men who have Sex with Men (MSM)

Men who have sex with men (MSM) is a term that considers male same-sex sexual behaviour from a behavioural standpoint, rather than by sexual identity or orientation. In other words, it is the behaviour (same-sex male sexual relations) that is of interest, and not one’s sexual orientation or identification (e.g., gay, bisexual, queer, heterosexual, and so on). The term is useful, especially from an epidemiological perspective, in that it recognizes that not all men who have sexual relations with other men necessarily identify as “homosexual,” “gay,” or even “bisexual.” That being said, there is some backlash from the gay community in that the term MSM is problematic because it denies aspects of gay community (Dowsett, 2006; Young & Meyer, 2005).

MSM is the term chosen for this research because the study deliberately sampled men with various sexual identities, including some MSM who identified as bisexual or indeed heterosexual. To refer to, and sample, only gay-identified men would be to exclude populations of men who need to be included in studies such as these. Indeed, as the findings will demonstrate, how MSM use the Internet in their sexual lives is influenced by their identified sexual orientation and their level of experience with same-sex relations.

4.2.1.2. Internet and Same-Sex Sexual Purposes

For the purposes of this study, online “sexual purposes” were conceptualized broadly to encompass any form of Internet use which involves sexuality; for example, learning about sexual practices or safe sex, cybersex, viewing sexually explicit materials, finding sex partners, and so on. Much of the extant literature focuses on a more narrow definition, mainly finding partners online for offline sexual encounters. The purpose of this study, however, was to investigate more broadly how the Internet fits into the sexual lives of MSM, thus it would be too limiting to restrict the scope of interest to only sex seeking. It was left to the participants to define their own sexual uses of the Internet during the interview. “Same-sex sexual purposes” refers to the use of
the Internet for any sexual purpose involving someone of the same sex (that is, other men in the case of this study).

4.2.2. Research Sample

This study focused on MSM – men who are behaviourally-identified with same-sex sexual relations, rather than only those men who identify as “gay” or “bisexual.” This strategy was adopted to ensure that the sample included non-gay-identified men, a population not yet well-represented in the literature on Internet and sex – or indeed in public health research more generally (Boehmer, 2002; Boulton, 1993; Boulton & Fitzpatrick, 1996; Doll, 1997; Doll et al., 1997). Men were eligible to participate in the study if they met the following criteria: (1) had sex with a man in the past or were exploring the idea of doing so; (2) presently use or have used the Internet for a same-sex sexual purpose; (3) live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), broadly defined as Toronto and surrounding areas, such as Mississauga, Etobicoke, North York, and other nearby environs; (4) were at least 18 years of age; and (5) speak and read English fluently.

It was important to have a diverse sample that encompassed some key dimensions, including HIV status (positive, negative, never tested); sexual identification (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual); and usage of the Internet (e.g., cybersex as opposed to finding sex partners). This being the case, stratified purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to sample men across important characteristics. As the discussion on the participant demographics below demonstrates, the strategy was successful and the sample provided “information-rich” cases (Patton, 2002) for understanding how and why MSM use the Internet for sexual purposes.

4.2.2.1. Recruitment

In order to achieve the stratified purposive sample, recruitment took place through numerous avenues: (1) chatroom profiles; (2) electronic “classified” ads; (3) newspaper ads; (4) posters; and (5) word of mouth. This recruitment strategy follows somewhat the lead of Elford and colleagues (2004a) who likewise studied Internet sex seeking among MSM in London, England. Recruitment methods, detailed below, used variations of the central recruitment flyer, which can be found in Appendix B. Participants were offered a cash and/or gift card honorarium for their participation. Initially participants were offered an honorarium in the amount of $5.00; this amount was later raised to $20.00, as detailed in the discussion on recruitment challenges below.
Honoraria were paid either in person or through electronic means (e.g., an electronic gift certificate for *amazon.ca* or a cash payment through *PayPal*, an online money transfer service). In cases of electronic payment, no mention was made of the study in arranging the payment, to ensure participant confidentiality.

Recruitment took place between September 2007 and July 2008. Recruitment was delayed on a few occasions due to requests to the Office of Research Ethics at University of Toronto made by the researcher to amend the study protocol.

A combination of online and offline recruiting was important for a number of reasons: (1) men using the chatrooms and other websites to find sexual partners are of key importance to this study; (2) men recruited online tend to differ from men recruited offline with respect to sexual behaviour and sexual orientation; and (3) online recruitment may reach men who may not be reached by the other recruitment methods (including non-gay-identified MSM). Overall, the recruitment strategy aimed to reach both gay men and other MSM by targeting the chatrooms themselves, as well as other venues which are not particularly “gay-focused,” such as HIV clinics, AIDS service organizations (ASOs) and the popular press.

To facilitate recruitment, a telephone line with voicemail, a study e-mail address and a website were established. The telephone line was located at the University with a University line prefix (i.e., 978-xxxx). The line was programmed to go directly to voicemail since the researcher was unable to staff the telephone line at all times. The voicemail message indicated that it was a confidential mailbox for the MISM Study, and that interested participants should leave a name (or pseudonym if preferred), a telephone number and/or an e-mail address, the best time to contact, and whether or not the researcher was permitted to leave a message on voicemail if a call was unanswered. The voicemail box was checked daily.

The e-mail address used for the study was mism@utoronto.ca, with the aim that the University of Toronto domain address would lend credibility to the study by showing that it was indeed affiliated with the University. A study website was established on the website for the HIV
The website offered different pages for (a) men seeking information on the study and how to participate, and (b) those men who were interested in participating. For potential participants, the website included an online version of the recruitment flyer. A letter of information and consent form were made available online for those requesting an online interview, as detailed further in the discussions on data collection and on ethics. The website also made available electronic resources as well as hyperlinks to other resources on sexual health counseling, sexually transmitted infection (STI) information, and lists of HIV/STI testing sites in the Greater Toronto Area. The website also provided instructions for clearing browser caches, to protect the privacy of those who visited the page. One potential participant questioned the credibility of the study because the HIV Studies Unit website is not on the University of Toronto domain (i.e., utoronto.ca). In response, a note was added to each page explaining the affiliations of the study and providing contact information for the Office of Research Ethics for people to contact to inquire about the authenticity of the study. The website provided information on how to contact the study through e-mail and telephone.

*Chatroom Profile.* Research suggests that men seeking sexual partners usually use regional chatrooms to do so (Brown et al., 2005), thus participants were recruited through region-specific rooms on the popular website gay.com. The chatrooms on gay.com offer numerous rooms specific to the Toronto area and recruitment focused on four of those rooms: (1) “real-time,” where men are explicitly seeking partners for offline sexual encounters; (2) “city-wide,” a room for more general chat; (3) “Asian,” a room targeted at Asian MSM and men interested in them; and (4) “Mature,” a room again targeted at “older” men and men interested in them. These rooms were chosen for a number of strategic purposes. First, from a practical standpoint, they are rooms that tend to have a greater number of users. Other rooms, such as “Bisexual” or “Poz” tend to have very few users at any one time. In contrast, most of the rooms above have 100+ users during the evenings, especially on weekends; indeed, the rooms can have close to 100 users

10 Please note the majority of recruitment took place before the opening of the new school of public health and thus the study was affiliated with the Department of Public Health Sciences.
during the day as well. Second, the specificity of these rooms facilitated recruitment for purposive sampling: the “real-time” room was used by men looking for sex, in most cases, immediately; the “city-wide” room offered access to men who might not be explicitly looking for sex, but still using the Internet for sexual purposes; and the “Asian” and “Mature” rooms gave access to men who could bring specific diversity to the sample. These rooms also permitted some quasi-theoretical sampling insofar as issues of race and age had been identified in other work on sex and the Internet.

A profile was established for the study to recruit men from these chatrooms. The screen name for the profile was “mism_study” with a bio line introducing the study. A profile page was created for this identity which provided background information on the study (a copy of this profile can be found in Appendix C). No picture was used. The gay.com chat client, in the non-premium (i.e., non-paying member) version, allowed entrance into only two chatrooms simultaneously. Two rooms were chosen on a rotating schedule to ensure coverage of all four rooms targeted for recruitment. Recruitment from the chatroom was targeted to different days and times of the week to ensure coverage of users who may be using the chatroom at different times.

Recruitment in the chatrooms was passive, so as to not offend the rules of the chatrooms (Planet Out, 2008) nor the acceptable “netiquette” of chatrooms more generally (Liampittong & Ezzy, 2005). It is generally considered unacceptable, for instance, to initiate unsolicited “private chats” for reasons other than personal. Commercial companies are expressly forbidden from doing so in gay.com chatrooms, and in the same manner it would not be considered appropriate for a researcher to actively recruit members through private chats. Doing so would have run the risk of becoming banned from all gay.com chatrooms. Thus, recruitment took place by interested chatroom participants sending a private message to the researcher, at which point

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11 The bio line appears in the chat client after the screen name; it is a place to write a quick note about oneself that can be read by others in the chatroom without having to visit the user’s profile. The following line was used to recruit participants from the chatrooms: “Men needed for U of T study: Do you use the Internet for sexual purposes? Tell us about it. Pvt [private chat] or visit www.hivstudiesunit.ca/MISM for more information.”

12 Private chats take place between only two participants in the chat room, as opposed to the public chat room where all exchanges between participants can be seen.
questions about the study could be answered and, if amenable, an interview scheduled. Five men were recruited from these chatrooms.

\textit{Electronic “classified” ads.} Advertisements for the study, again based on the central recruitment text, were placed on two popular Toronto-area electronic classified ad boards: \textit{Craigslist} and the website for \textit{NOW Toronto}, a bi-weekly entertainment newspaper. The \textit{Craigslist} ad was posted on the boards for “Volunteers” on the Toronto site, at no charge; the ad was reposted when it expired (every 45 days). The ad on the \textit{NOW Toronto} website was placed in the “focus groups/studies” category. This posting was also free, although the ad was upgraded at cost to repost it every Monday morning so that it would remain “fresh.”\textsuperscript{14} Six men were recruited through \textit{Craigslist} and two through \textit{NOW Toronto}.

A graphic study ad also appeared on the front page of the website of \textit{GayGuideToronto.com}, an online resource for the Toronto gay community. A copy of this ad is in Appendix D. This ad appeared for two months (October and November 2007) on their homepage. Clicking on the ad brought visitors to the central study website on the HIV Studies Unit domain. However, no participants in the study reported having learned about the study from this site.

\textit{Newspaper Advertisements.} Advertisements for the study were run in the printed versions of \textit{MetroNews}, a daily commuter newspaper, and \textit{Xtra! Toronto}, a bi-weekly gay-focused publication. \textit{MetroNews} is read by approximately 450,000 people daily in the GTA, especially on commuter trains running through the area, thus it was an appropriate avenue to reach men in the GTA, especially those who might not read gay-focused publications (i.e., non-gay-identified men). The advertisement in \textit{MetroNews} was run for three Wednesdays early in the recruitment phase (October-November 2007). The run of advertisements in this paper was limited due to the very high cost of advertising. One participant reported having found the study through \textit{MetroNews}.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Craigslist} is a popular free posting site for classified advertisements of all natures, with region-specific sites for major cities worldwide.

\textsuperscript{14} For the first round of advertisements, an option was paid for that highlighted the ad at the top of the page for that category. However, other ads that were likewise highlighted appeared to be for questionable studies, thus this process was discontinued for recruiting in the MISM Study to limit any impression that this was not a credible study.
Xtra! Toronto is a gay-focused publication, published bi-weekly with a readership of approximately 85,000 in the GTA. A study advertisement was run three times (for a total of six weeks of coverage) in October and November 2007. Like MetroNews, advertisements in this paper were quite costly, hence the short run. Three men reported having found the study in Xtra! Toronto.

Posters. Posters advertising the study were placed in numerous venues: (1) AIDS service organizations; (2) STI/HIV testing clinics; (3) community organizations (gay-focused); and (4) bathhouses. Posters were placed in these locations in downtown Toronto only, and mainly in the “gay village,” as this was the most central and relevant location to find these sites. Again, the sites were chosen strategically to maximize a stratified purposive sample. AIDS service organizations would reach HIV-positive men, whom are important to sample because these men are central to understanding the situations under which HIV is transmitted (Elford et al., 2004a), and they may use the Internet to find sexual partners in different ways than HIV-negative or unknown status users (Bolding et al., 2005; Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001b; Elford, Bolding, Davis, Sherr, & Hart, 2004b; Halkitis & Parsons, 2003).

Recruitment from the testing site was important to reach men seeking testing for HIV and/or other sexually transmitted infections who were therefore likely to have put themselves at risk for contracting HIV (Elford et al., 2004a; Myers et al., 1998; Worthington & Myers, 2003). Further, men with a history of repeat testing may engage in high-risk sexual behaviours (Dawson, Fitzpatrick, McLean, Hart, & Boulton, 1991; Fernyak, Page-Shafer, Kellogg, McFarland, & Katz, 2002; Fisher, DelGado, Melchreit, & Spurlock-McLendon, 2002; Leaity et al., 2000).

Gay-focused community organizations would reach a broad spectrum of gay men and bathhouses would reach men who are seeking anonymous sexual encounters, much like those found online. One participant was recruited from an ASO, the HIV/STI testing clinic, and bathhouses. No participants reported learning about the study from the poster at the community organization.

Word of Mouth. One participant was recruited after hearing about the study from a colleague of the researcher.

Two participants could not recall where they initially saw the study advertised. One must keep in mind that the recruitment numbers presented above for each recruitment method reflect only
those men who actually participated in the study. These numbers do not reflect men who saw an advertisement but were not interested in participating, nor men who contacted the study but ultimately did not participate; information was not systematically collected on where men who only contacted the study (but ultimately did not participate) were recruited from. The next section details some of these such challenges encountered in the recruitment strategy.

4.2.2.2. Recruitment Challenges

Challenges were encountered in recruiting from some of the stratified populations. Certainly, recruiting men who identified as gay/homosexual and, to some degree, bisexual, was not difficult. Nor was it particularly difficult to recruit men of different HIV-statuses, as reflected in the discussion on the sample demographics below. However, three populations presented some challenges in recruitment: (1) men having unprotected sex with partners met online; (2) non-gay-identified men; and (3) men from ethnic/visible minority backgrounds.

As discussed in the literature review, quantitative studies on Internet sex seeking among MSM seem to suggest, for the most part, that MSM online tend to have higher sexual risk tendencies. However, the men in this sample, as discussed in the empirical chapters to follow, tended to practice safer sex as a matter of course. This is not to say that these men did not ever have unprotected sex, but it was somewhat surprising that men with “riskier” sexual behaviours were not recruited into this study. This problem arises quite frequently in qualitative research, where participants are asked to talk about very sensitive, personal topics usually face-to-face with a researcher, in most cases, a relative stranger. Nonetheless, researchers in the field of gay sexuality tend to report that gay men/MSM are quite forthcoming with the details of their sexual lives (Catania, Gibson, Marin, Coates, & Greenblatt, 1990). To this end, Catania and colleagues (1990) quote one of their gay respondents: “When you’ve had experience negotiating fist fucking, it really doesn’t seem difficult to talk about sucking someone’s cock” (p. 26). This statement does not mean, however, that all gay men would feel the same way. Indeed, the participants in this study were likewise, on the whole, happy to provide detailed accounts of their sexual lives. Thus it may be an issue related more to recruitment into the study rather than a social desirability bias at work. It is difficult to conjecture why men who engage in higher-risk sex did not participate in this study.
It was likewise difficult to recruit non-gay-identified men into this study, as well as men from more diverse ethnic backgrounds. Non-gay-identified MSM, including men who identify as “bisexual” or “straight,” are difficult to recruit into studies on same-sex sexual relations. As such, they are an understudied population, thus the interest in this population here.

Similarly, men from different ethnic backgrounds, especially those of visible minority backgrounds, are difficult to recruit into sexuality studies for various reasons, including a fear of being “outed” or cultural influences which disdain talking about sexuality with a stranger, especially same-sex sexuality, which may also be looked negatively upon in cultural values. To attempt to overcome this issue, posters advertising the study were posted in ASOs that provided services to ethnic groups, including Asians, South Asians, and Blacks. A research working group on ethno-cultural MSM issues in Toronto was also consulted to help with recruitment for this study.

An overarching issue, probably related to these recruitment challenges, was a problem related to the study honorarium. As a doctoral study with a limited research budget, most of which was taken up by advertising costs, the original honorarium was a very small, token amount ($5.00). However, it became apparent that the small size of this honorarium was a barrier to recruitment. For instance, in discussions with potential participants, many times the first question asked was “how much does it pay,” and many interested participants lost that interest when they learned the honorarium amount. In fact, in one instance, a potential participant indicated that market research firms paid upwards of $70/hour for research participation, thus he would not even consider participating in this study. While on one hand the argument can be made that participants who volunteer for a study simply for the honorarium would not make the best participants, it was concerning that those with valuable contributions to make to the study might be dissuaded by the small amount of the honorarium, given other constraints on their time (such as work or school) and the fact that they would be asked to provide very personal information on a very sensitive topic.

Sampling in qualitative research tends to be constrained by practical limitations in the accessibility of the audience in question and their interest and/or availability in participating (Daly et al., 2007; Gibbs et al., 2007; Patton, 2002). However, to attempt to address these issues, a number of recruitment changes were implemented mid-way through the study. First, ethics
approval was sought (and received) to revise the recruitment materials to more explicitly target MSM having unprotected sex and non-gay-identified MSM. New posters and electronic ads were distributed reflecting these changes, and the study website was likewise updated. Second, ethics approval was also sought and received to increase the honorarium amount to $20.00, payable in cash only. These strategic changes appeared to have an effect on recruitment: fewer potential participants complained about the size of the honorarium, and additional non-gay-identified MSM and MSM from different ethnic backgrounds (but still to a limited extent) were interviewed.

4.2.2.3. Description of the Sample

The final sample included 23 MSM who used the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes.

*Age.* Ages of the men in the sample ranged from 20 to 61 years of age. The average age was approximately 38.

*Sexual Identity.* Men were asked how they describe their sexual orientation or identity. The majority of men (n=13) identified as gay. One participant identified himself as “queer.” Five men identified as bisexual, and two men identified as straight (heterosexual). One participant indicated that he did not identify with any one sexuality, and another participant refused to answer the question. Only two of the men were presently in a relationship with a man, with a mean relationship length of 7.5 years.

*HIV Status.* Participants were asked if they had ever had an HIV test, and if so, their HIV status, and the number of HIV tests they had ever had. All but two of the participants had tested for HIV; both men who had not tested were non-gay-identified. Of those men that had tested, 15 were HIV-negative and six were HIV-positive.

*Sexually Transmitted Diseases/Infections.* Participants were asked to name any STDS or STIs they had experienced in the past 12 months. Almost all (n=19) reported having no diseases in the past 12 months, which can be seen as a proxy for the participants’ practice of safer sex, as earlier. Of the four who did report diseases in the past 12 months, one had gonorrhea, one had herpes, and two had a parasite they believe they acquired through anal-oral contact.
Racial/Ethnic Identity. Participants were asked if they identified with any specific racial or ethnic group. Most (n=19) identified as Caucasian. Of the other four, two identified as Asian and two did not stipulate. Participants were also asked about their country of birth. Sixteen of the participants were born in Canada. Other countries of birth included Bulgaria, Hong Kong, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, South Korea and the United States of America. Thus, while the self-identified racial/ethnic identity may not show much diversity, the participants did come from a diverse spectrum of countries of birth, including Europe and Asia. Twenty of the men reported that English was the language spoken in their home; other languages included French, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish.

Education. This sample was well-educated: 14 men held a Bachelor’s-level degree, two had a Master’s-level degree, and five had some university studies (some still in completion). One participant had completed some college, while another had completed some secondary school education.

Employment. The participants had diverse employment situations. Nine men were employed full-time, and two indicated they had part-time employment. Five men said they were self-employed, one indicated he was a casual employee, and another was a contract worker. Two participants were still students, two participants were unemployed, and one participant was retired. Most participants were employed in service occupations and only one was employed in a position which would be considered “manual labour.”

Income Levels. Participants were asked to estimate their pre-tax income from the previous year. Income levels for these men were quite varied, which was not terribly surprising given their diverse employment situations. Twelve of the men reported incomes under $30,000 per year, with four of those men reporting incomes under $15,000 a year. Nine of the participants made between $30,000 to $70,000. Two men reported annual incomes greater than $80,000.

Living Arrangements. The majority of men (n=19) said they lived in Toronto. Two men specified that they lived in North York and two lived in Mississauga. All men in the sample lived in the greater Toronto area. Most men lived alone (n=15). Six lived with roommates and two lived with their partners.
As earlier, the sampling strategy aimed for a purposeful stratified sample, to allow a broader investigation of how men of different sexual orientations, HIV statuses, and ethnic diversity. The demographic data collected and presented above were not collected with the aim of demonstrating a representative sample (Willis et al., 2007) but rather to ensure that a breadth of men had been sampled across the variables of interest (Patton, 2002) and to give some context to the participants’ lives. Recruitment was somewhat successful in sampling men across a variety of sexual orientations, although a greater proportion of non-gay-identified men would have been welcome, as would have a greater number of men from different ethnic backgrounds.

Table 1 overviews selected demographics from each participant in the study. Where participants are cited in the findings, information about the participant number, their age, sexual identity and HIV status are also provided (HIV? in the interview citations refers to participants with an unknown HIV status).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>HIV Status</th>
<th>Where Recruited</th>
<th>Interview Administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>001</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Chatroom</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>002</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Chatroom</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>003</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Chatroom</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>Some high school</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>AIDS service org</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>005</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Some university</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Craigslist</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>006</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Craigslist</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
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<td>Positive</td>
<td>Craigslist</td>
<td>In Person</td>
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<tr>
<td>008</td>
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<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Xtra!</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>009</td>
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<td>Some university</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Referral</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
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<td>Chatroom</td>
<td>Online</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Xtra!</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>012</td>
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<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Xtra!</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Craigslist</td>
<td>Online</td>
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<td>Negative</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>016</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Craigslist</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</table>
4.2.3. Data Collection

Consistent with focused ethnographic inquiry, data were collected in this study through a semi-structured interview (Morse & Richards, 2002). The researcher used a standard interview schedule to conduct the interviews, to attempt consistency throughout the interviews. However, in the tradition of qualitative inquiry, participants were encouraged to elaborate on issues raised that were not included in the interview schedule, and to direct the interview with respect to the sequencing of topics. In other words, the participants were “in charge” of the interview, and the researcher probed and redirected questions as appropriate, while respecting the direction in which the participant wished to take the interview. Given the focus in this study in understanding the men’s own perspectives, it was important to not force an inflexible format to the interview.

The interview schedule was guided by the objectives of this study, with input from stakeholder consultations with interested community members and groups, as well as the approaches in other qualitative studies which have sought to examine sexual risk perception, management and behaviour among MSM. The initial interview schedule was altered after the first two interviews to revise some questions and question sequencing (the final version of the interview schedule can be found in Appendix E). The schedule covered the following topics: use of the Internet for sexual purposes; same-sex sexual behaviour more generally; use of the Internet to find male sexual partners; social and sexual networks online; and perspectives on HIV prevention. Basic demographics were also collected.

4.2.3.1.1. Interview Administration

Participants could choose to participate in an interview either in-person (face-to-face or over the telephone) or through electronic means (synchronous online chat or via e-mail).

Twelve participants were interviewed in-person; only one was interviewed over the telephone. Interviews were tape-recorded in their entirety (with the participant’s permission) and transcribed verbatim. The researcher transcribed all of the interviews personally to ensure accuracy and to enhance familiarity and understanding of the interviews (Green et al., 2007). Interviews took place at an office on the University of Toronto campus.
Nine participants were interviewed online, using a synchronous chat program. One participant would only participate if he could receive and respond to the interview questions by e-mail. Regrettably, this interview had much less content than others, consistent with the researcher’s experience with e-mail interviews (Lombardo, 2004b). The online interviews were conducted using a program called “Trillian,” which is a chat client that can operate through popular online messaging programs, including MSN Messenger and Yahoo! Messenger. Trillian was configured to archive all conversations (with the participant’s permission), thus directly capturing the interview into a format to be imported into data analysis software (after identifying characteristics had been removed).

Online interviewing has been utilized in a growing number of studies (see, e.g., Ayling & Mewse, 2009; Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Chen & Hinton, 1999; Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2004; Hamman, 1997), and its popularity is growing. Online interviews were particularly appropriate for this study for two reasons. First, given that the participants were being asked to report on their Internet use for sexual purposes, it was a relatively safe assumption that the participants would be astute at “chatting” online, and may indeed prefer to converse in that format, due to familiarity with the medium and the fact that travel was not required, nor was it required to be in the physical presence of the researcher. Second, researchers have noted that conducting interviews online can present numerous benefits for the quality of the data collected, particularly for research on sensitive topics, since they increase anonymity and diminish social desirability biases, leading to richer data (Ayling & Mewse, 2009; Hessler et al., 2003; Hewson, Laurent, & Vogel, 1996; Joinson, 2001; Lombardo & Gillett, 2006; Mustanski, 2001; Rhodes, Bowie, & Hergenrather, 2003; Smith & Leigh, 1997). It was expected, therefore, that participants would feel more comfortable speaking candidly in online interviews, especially for non-gay-identified men. At the same time, one study (in fact, on a similar topic), suggested that online interviews were somewhat problematic: they were slow, produced less data, and were fraught with technical problems (Davis et al., 2004).

Although it is difficult to say with accuracy, it appeared that the in-person interviews did indeed generate more data than did the ones conducted online. However, this is to be expected given that it is probably easier to express ideas and stories by speaking rather than typing, especially for a sustained period of time. Data collection methods tend to require a compromise (Daly et al., 2007; Gibbs et al., 2007; Patton, 2002), and this study was no exception: many of the online
interviews were conducted with non-gay-identified men, who may not have been comfortable being interviewed in any other way. Thus, although the online interviews generated less data, this is preferable to having no data from these men. Despite their drawbacks, the online interviews were important to this study because of the sensitive nature of the research, as well as their relationship to the topic of the study.

### 4.2.4. Data Analysis

Following qualitative tradition, interview data were analyzed inductively, with an emphasis on concepts, themes and patterns emerging from the data. Given the symbolic/structural interactionist drive of the study, the analysis focused specifically on interaction and the linkages and influences of social context on those interactions, both in the men’s online and offline “worlds.”

Immersion in the data is an important first and continuing step in qualitative data analysis (Green et al., 2007). Immersion was achieved in numerous ways. First, the researcher conducted all interviews and transcribed them verbatim, facilitating immersion in the data from the outset. Second, the researcher read the transcripts in their entirety before beginning coding as well as after initial coding processes (to perform “follow up” coding). Finally, coded sections of the transcripts were read and re-read numerous times during the coding phases.

All transcripts were imported into NVivo 2.0 qualitative data analysis software to aid in data management and analysis. All coding and memoing was contained within the NVivo project file for this study. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively to the greatest practical extent (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). It was sometimes difficult, particularly during the early stages of recruitment and collection, to coordinate data collection, transcription and analysis simultaneously.

Coding progressed through two stages, although not necessarily always linearly. The first phase of coding was “sign-post” or “topic” coding (Gibbs, 2002; Morse & Richards, 2002; Richards, 2005), to identify the key areas of analysis (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). At this phase, sections of each transcript were coded into their relevant node (e.g., “perspectives on safer sex,” “differences online/offline,” “pathways to the Internet”) for later sub-coding. Memos were started at this phase to capture early conceptual thinking on these areas for later analysis. Nodes
at this stage were all “free nodes,” in NVivo terminology; these nodes were later organized into a node tree by relevant category.

The second phase of coding was finer “analytic” coding, or sub-coding of the nodes established in the first phase of coding (Gibbs, 2002; Morse & Richards, 2002; Richards, 2005). At this stage, each of the “free” nodes created above were reviewed for sub-coding into finer nodes for analytic concepts such as dimensions of experiences, patterns, or strategies. Where the complexity of the data required it, these sub-codes were further refined. During this analytical phase of coding, all text coded at specific nodes was read on a whole to gain a broader understanding of the ideas collected there and then the specific text from each interview was compared to similar instances to uncover patterns, dimensions, differences, and explanations for those differences.

The coding processes were heavily influenced by the guidelines offered by Richards (2005) and Dey (1993), to move the data to a more abstract and analytical level. For instance, at each detail of interest in the transcript, the question was asked “Why is it interesting?” followed by “Why am I interested in that?” (Richards, 2005, p. 94). The focus in this analysis was on the contextual aspects of the experiences that men recounted. An integrated approach was used to develop the codes (Bradley et al., 2007), such that some codes were pre-determined from the literature review and study objectives (e.g., differences between online and offline sex seeking) while most others were discovered inductively (e.g., the “e-presentation of self”). After the development of the initial coding structure, the transcripts were re-read and re-coded where necessary (Green et al., 2007; Richards, 2005). The categories were saturated to the greatest extent possible within the confines of the sampling strategy (Green et al., 2007). In some cases further development of categories would have benefited from more participants with certain characteristics—for example, non-gay-identified men—but the reality of the sampling challenges prevented this.

Themes were identified through the analytical coding phase. For example, the theme of the “situated nature of the online sexual search” was identified from men’s experiences in the categories of “presenting the self” and “constructing the Other.” These emergent themes were then situated within relevant theoretical and empirical literatures as a means of explaining their significance.
Memos were used for a variety of purposes. In the process of analysis, memos were used to capture thoughts on the development of new and existing nodes, as well as in the development of categories and themes. Memos were also used to capture ongoing research concerns, ongoing theoretical ideas, and tracking interesting hunches that needed to be followed-up on. NVivo was particularly useful in the memo writing, analysis and subsequent dissertation writing, as it permitted transcripts to be embedded within memos at relevant passages, as well as permitted nodes to be embedded in memos, such that the researcher could easily navigate between relevant coded sections during the analysis. From a data management perspective, this made facilitating the analysis much easier. In many cases, much of the actual discussion and analysis that is included in the empirical chapters was written up initially in these analytical memos.

4.2.5. Ethics

This study received approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board for Health Sciences. After the primary approval, three amendments were applied for and received: (1) to offer a $5.00 honorarium to participants (not initially included in the original research protocol); (2) to revise the recruitment materials to target specific populations; and (3) to raise the honorarium amount to $20.00 to increase participation through greater incentive.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, especially for non-gay-identified men or gay men not “out,” it was especially important to guarantee participants anonymity and confidentiality. Specific steps were taken to this end: participants did not have to use their real name to participate in the study; they could correspond with the study through a non-identifying e-mail address; and any personally-identifying material was either (a) not transcribed, in the case of in-person interviews; or (b) edited out, in the case of online interviews. Electronic transcript files and audio files of the interviews were stored on a computer on the University campus as well as at the researcher’s home. Only the researcher and the members of the doctoral supervision committee had access to the transcripts. In accordance with University of Toronto policy, the data will be securely stored for seven years and then properly destroyed.

All participants were given a letter of information and consent form for the study before proceeding with the interview. These documents (included in Appendices F and G) explained the goals and objectives of the study; how data would be managed; declared the study as independent of the venue where it was advertised; explained the role of the participant in the
research and the risks and benefits he may encounter; emphasized that participation was voluntary and that the participant could choose not to participate without repercussion; indicated that a participant could end the interview at any time; and emphasized that the participant would not be asked for any identifying information, nor would he be asked to reveal any such identifying information. Participants were also given information about how to contact the researcher so that they could have questions answered after the fact, or access the results when available.

This study posed no physical risks, nor any direct benefits, to the participants. It was possible that the sensitive nature of the questions could trigger personal distress, especially for non-gay-identified men. Accordingly, the researcher had available during each interview a resource package on sexual counseling and HIV/STI testing should the participant request them (only one participant did so).

For the in-person interviews, participants were presented with a letter of information and consent form to read before beginning the interview. To further protect anonymity, participants were not asked to sign a consent form; instead, they offered verbal consent which was digitally recorded during the interview. They also verbally offered their consent to have their interview digitally recorded (no participants declined). For the online interviews, participants were directed to the study website to familiarize themselves with the letter of information and the consent form. Consent to participate was received during the online interview. To ensure that the participant had indeed read the letter and consent form, the researcher quizzed the participant on content within those documents. As a double check, the researcher also reiterated important information on the participant’s rights before proceeding with the interview. The participant who was interviewed over the phone was likewise directed to the online versions of the letter of information and consent, and he offered verbal consent to participate.

4.2.6. Research Rigour and Reflexivity

4.2.6.1. Rigour

Consideration of rigour were built into this study following guidelines on producing high-quality qualitative research (e.g., Giacomini & Cook, 2000; Morse, 2004; Morse et al., 2002; Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998).
First, samples for qualitative studies should be purposefully selected and recruit participants with specific knowledge of the phenomena in question; in other words, samples should be both appropriate and adequate (Kuzel, 1999). The study took individual MSM who use the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes as its focus, which is consistent with the driving research questions and objectives. The recruitment strategy appropriately sampled MSM across the different characteristics deemed important from a review of the extant literature. Further, the strategy constructed a stratified sample of diverse men who share similar experiences, also congruent with the goals of a focused ethnography (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Data collection methods should also be congruent with the objectives of the research enterprise. Interviews conducted provided insight into the men’s experiences of their use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes, their social contexts, and their perceptions of sexual risk (where applicable). Further, the sample included a diverse range of MSM, such that the driving research questions could be explored in-depth to provide useful insight for the development of online sexual health promotion. The proposed data collection methods were complementary and suitable to the study research questions.

It is further imperative that qualitative analysis be comprehensive, by supporting thick description and providing context for analytical assertions. This study maximized breadth through its sample, stratified across various dimensions of MSM who use the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes. It maximized depth by collecting data through semi-structured interviews which allowed the participants to speak at length on the questions at hand. Data analysis accorded priority to the participants’ views and understandings of their Internet use, the encompassing goal for the study.

As another aspect of rigour, it should be established that the researcher has the skills to carry out the proposed research (Morse, 2004). Prior to this study, I had conducted 50 semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews, including questions on sensitive topics such as health behaviour and HIV/AIDS. I was thus comfortable with interviewing, especially on sensitive topics. I have experience in conducting qualitative analyses (Lombardo, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Gastaldo et al., in press). Further, I have previously used the Internet to conduct qualitative research into HIV/AIDS (Lombardo, 2003, 2004a), and I am primary author on a chapter in a volume on health research and the Internet about using the Internet to conduct qualitative HIV/AIDS
research (Lombardo & Gillett, 2006). I have also written in the area of health communication (Lombardo, 2005; Lombardo & Léger, 2007; Valente, Thesenvitz, & Lombardo, 2006), and I have worked in the area of MSM and sexual health as well (Gastaldo et al., in press; Holmes, Gastaldo, O’Byrne, & Lombardo, 2008; Lampinen et al., 2006; Lombardo, 2003, 2004a; Lombardo & Léger, 2007; Timoshkina, Lombardo, & McDonald, 2007).

I have completed undergraduate and graduate courses in symbolic interactionist theory, as well as qualitative methods and analysis, including a graduate course on computer software for qualitative data analysis. I have also completed graduate courses in health communication theory and practice, public health research methods, program evaluation, and a self-directed reading course on the role of the Internet in public health communication (Lombardo, 2005). I thus possess a relevant theoretical, methodological and practical background for this study.

I also have an established record of research dissemination. I have delivered papers at 12 academic conferences, and I have papers published (Holmes et al., 2008; Lombardo, 2004a; Lombardo & Howard-Hassmann, 2005; Lombardo & Gillett, 2006; Lombardo & Léger, 2007; Howard-Hassmann & Lombardo, 2007, 2008; Timoshkina et al., 2007; Valente et al., 2006) and in press (Gastaldo et al., in press). Finally, I was supported by a supervisory committee with extensive experience in the study of sexual behaviour among MSM, and in qualitative research. In sum, considerations of rigour and study quality have been integrated into the design of the proposed research, and I have the requisite background training, skills and knowledge.

4.2.6.2. Reflexivity

A final question of rigour involves the researcher’s own relation to the topic, with acknowledgement of the researcher’s a priori theoretical knowledge and personal experience and how it bears on the study in question (Malterud, 2001). These issues are taken up below with respect to this study.

First, the researcher holds a Bachelor and Master’s degree in sociology, with specific training in symbolic interactionist theory. Thus the study was designed from this perspective from the outset. It was with a sociological eye that the gaps in the extant literature were noted, most notably the lack of a perspective on men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes which acknowledged the social contexts in which that use occurred. Given the researcher’s background
in micro-sociology, there was an explicit assumption that men’s online experiences would have, at minimum, some intersection with their broader social and sexual lives, and that understanding these intersections would be key to developing appropriate responses. This assumption is borne out in the extant research. Further, the researcher has long been a critic of prevention models and initiatives which fail to address the powerful social aspects of sex and especially risk-taking in the sexual realm. Thus the research questions and objectives were designed from this vantage point, that there must be an understanding of how men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes is embedded within their social worlds.

Second, the researcher is a gay male, thus bringing to the study a familiarity with gay culture and same-sex behaviour. This familiarity was a benefit the study, as the researcher could better identify with the research participants with respect to experience with same-sex behaviour and knowledge of appropriate and relevant argot. In fact, in a small number of cases, participants noted their comfort in speaking to another gay male, assuming (rightly so) that the researcher had a vested interest in the topic and the community and was undertaking the research partly for intrinsic reasons. The researcher also has extensive experience with the Internet and its forms of communication, also allowing him to better relate to the participants’ stories and experiences. From a positivist view, it may be the case that my familiarity with the culture and my assumptions may blind me to the importance of certain data. The rigorous design of this study, however, helped to minimize any of these potential problematic effects.
Chapter 5  
Men’s Situated Use of the Internet for Sexual Purposes

5.1. Chapter Overview

A central focus of this study is an examination of how men’s use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes is embedded in their broader social and sexual lives. Accordingly, this chapter considers two topics: (1) how men use the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes and (2) the contextual factors that surround men’s use of the Internet for those purposes.

This chapter addresses the first and second objectives of this study. Following objective one, the first section of the chapter overviews the various ways in which the men in the sample used the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes. Following objective two, the subsequent discussion illuminates the ways men’s use of the Internet is socially-situated, and then proposes a typology of Internet use for sexual purposes developed on the men’s experiences. The chapter concludes with a general discussion of these findings.

5.2. Using the Internet for Same-Sex Sexual Purposes

In their interviews the participants talked about the diverse ways in which they used the Internet for sexual purposes involving other men. Three key themes emerged in how the men used the Internet in their sexual lives: (1) arranging offline sexual encounters; (2) simulated sexual encounters; and (3) sexual education and exploration.

5.2.1. Offline Sexual Encounters

The majority of men used the Internet to arrange offline sexual encounters, consistent with findings from other research in this area. Although the primary motivation for most of the men was to find male sexual partners, a number of the non-gay-identified participants also found female sexual partners online. However, almost all of those participants noted that male sex partners were much easier to find online than female ones: “It’s very hard to meet women online just for a sexual hookup, it’s not like men who will just be like, ‘Let’s fuck tonight, right now!’” (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-).
The vast majority of the men likewise explained that they sought “vanilla” sex online – defined as the more typical sexual acts, such as kissing, mutual masturbation, and oral and anal intercourse. Many of the men noted that they shied away from men looking for anything more on the “kinky” side, or men who were specifically seeking unprotected sex (barebacking). However, a minority of men did talk about using the Internet to find partners for specific sexual interests, such as exhibitionism or bondage. One participant in particular talked about using the Internet more frequently in the past year due to “wanting to explore various levels of sex, such as leather, groups and so on” (019: 28, gay, HIV+).

Overall, using the Internet to find sexual encounters was the most popular attraction of the Internet for the men in this sample. These findings speak to opportunities afforded by the Internet to locate specific types of sexual acts (e.g., vanilla or specialized) as well as to explore and expand one’s sexual repertoire. In these ways, the Internet played a pivotal role in expanding the men’s sexual networks and sexual experience.

That being said, the act of finding sex partners online for these men was a complex one, embedded in a larger web of social and contextual factors, as explored later in this chapter. The balance of this chapter and indeed the dissertation demonstrate the complexities and situated nature of the process of finding a sex partner online, complicating notions of Internet sex seeking as simple and straightforward and as merely about “finding sex.”

5.2.2. Simulated Sex

A less popular attraction of the Internet, on the whole, were the opportunities it presented for simulated sex. These opportunities included viewing sexually explicit materials (pictures, stories and videos), finding partners for phone sex, cybersex, and webcamming. These activities, of course, involved only self-stimulation. In this respect they present safe sex alternatives, but few of the participants were content to stop there in their sexual exploration and experiences.

However, some of the men in the sample were relatively new to same-sex relations, and for them simulated sex represented more than just self-gratification; instead, these experiences doubled as opportunities for learning about sex between men, as discussed below.
5.2.3. Sexual Education and Exploration

For a number of the participants, mainly those men new to same-sex relations, the Internet functioned as a source for sexual education and sexual exploration. For some of the men in the study, the Internet provided their first connections with other men for same-sex sexual relations. These first connections ranged from first experiences with seeing gay sexually explicit materials to their first experiences interacting with other men interested in men, as well as their first offline meetings and sexual encounters with other men.

As above, a few men used simulated sex to explore their nascent same-sex interests, and thus the Internet played an explorative (and educational) function in conjunction with its stimulation role. For instance, one of the bisexual participants noted his particular use for the Internet:

The *men4sexnow[.com]* ads, theoretically, yes, they are for offline sexual hookups although the ratio of people who respond to those I actually meet is extremely low. I also get enjoyment out of just having people respond to my ad, *sometimes that is a sexual end in itself*, seeing that *x* number of people would like to have sex with me, find me attractive, etc [italics added]. (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-)

For another bisexual participant, his Internet explorations led to the discovery of a particular sexual interest: “I watched a lot of porn and at some point I stumbled upon transsexual[s] by accident. It was called ‘shemale’ and instantly I was hooked” (022: 20, bisexual, HIV?). Such examples demonstrate the particularly important role the Internet can play for men who are new to same-sex relations in exploring their emerging same-sex interests.

Vis-à-vis this exploration function, the Internet was also a source for sexual education for these men. This educational function of the Internet was both formal and informal.

On the formal side, some participants talked about using websites to learn more about sexually transmitted infections and sexual safety and to find answers to their specific questions in those areas. Again, this type of use was mainly by men who were relatively new to same-sex relations. In a more informal way, some men also talked about learning about sex between men and sexual
safety by the discussions they had with other men during the course of their online interactions. Take, for instance, the experiences of this participant, when asked about how he first learned about sex between men:

I started going on the hookup sites. I would read forums, postings, etc., then research myself the different terms, STDs, HIV, etc., and then just go to understand more and more….I discuss [with potential partners] that I am in an experimental phase, and they discuss with me too. It’s good because I get to let out how I feel. It has [helped me]…the guys understand more, and give me general information about hooking up, etc. [I have learned] safe sex with men, more about exploring, and that there is a risk to everything, and to be safe [italics added]. (017: 21, straight, HIV?)

Such an experience is important because it highlights the role that the Internet can play in educating men about sex and sexual safety. This idea and its potential import for both HIV transmission and prevention is returned to later in this dissertation.

In fact, in some cases the Internet was the men’s only place to learn about same-sex relations, as noted by this participant:

I don’t know how else it [his sexual identity] would have developed, to be honest. Sex wasn’t spoken of by my parents, I guess it is culturally regarded as a highly inappropriate subject and thus avoided. And sex ed[ucation] in the public or private school sector wasn’t really capable of explaining the m/m f/f [male/male female/female] side of things. Even the heteros didn’t get much. It was simply “use a condom, don’t make children.” (020: 22, bisexual, HIV-)

Thus the Internet can fill an important gap in men’s sexual education and indeed it may be some men’s only place to easily find information about sex between men. These findings on men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes are important because they demonstrate that the Internet can mean much more to men than simply a place to meet sexual partners. While this may be the
ostensible reason for men’s being online, the experience can represent much more than only the sexual connection. This finding has implications for HIV prevention, as dealt with in a later chapter.

As argued throughout the balance of this chapter, and indeed this thesis, there must be a more comprehensive understanding of how the Internet fits into the sexual lives of MSM, and the context in which that use occurs, to fully understand what the Internet means to men who use it for same-sex sexual purposes. It is only through this type of analysis that HIV prevention will be able to deliver programming which is responsive to men’s experiences online. This section has highlighted the different ways in which men engage the Internet in their sexual lives. Following from this discussion, the next section considers the broader contexts of men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives.

5.3. Structuring Contexts: The Internet as “Solution”

A central concern of this study was an understanding of the socially-situated nature of men’s Internet use for sexual purposes, following the structural interactionist drive of the study. A socially-situated approach acknowledges how men’s Internet use is situated within their broader social and sexual lives. To this end, this chapter develops the notion of “structuring contexts,” a concept that refers to the contexts which surround and may come to influence men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes. The concept is returned to in subsequent chapters, to show how these contexts can potentially come to influence sexual interactions, consistent with a structural interactionist approach.

In this chapter, structuring contexts refer to the contextual factors that emerged from the men’s discussions on how they came to use the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes, and where the Internet fits into their sexual lives. A focus on these factors helps illuminate some of the broader structural influences that this study was centrally concerned with.

A central theme in the participants’ stories was their construction of the Internet as a viable “solution” to various challenges they experienced in their sexual lives. These problems that the men in the sample encountered included (1) tensions related to their same-sex sexual interests; (2) restricted social connections; (3) disenchantment with previous sex seeking experiences; and (4) improving the sexual search.
5.3.1. Resolving Tensions Related to Same-Sex Sexual Interests

For some of the men in the study, the Internet offered a place to explore their sexual interest in men with little consequence for their offline lives. This theme was discussed mainly by men who were non-gay-identified, or by gay-identified men who were reflecting on their coming out experiences and where the Internet fit into those experiences. These men were caught in a problematic situation: while they wanted to explore their same-sex interests, traditional venues in which to do so were blocked because they were concerned about being found out. The Internet provided a practicable solution to this predicament. The private and anonymous nature of Internet communication facilitated the same-sex interaction these men desired without the necessity to expose themselves to more traditional places to find same-sex companionship, such as gay bars, bathhouses, or public sex environments. In this way, the Internet afforded these men a measure of “safety of reputation,” by keeping their sexual interest in men a private one.

To this end, one of the heterosexually-identified participants remarked that looked for sex with men online when he needed a sexual release and was unable to find a female sexual partner; this use usually coincided with his abuse of drugs and/or alcohol. In his case, the anonymous nature of the Internet was important because “if you’re proposing to do it with a man and you’re saying you’re heterosexual then you can remain anonymous and never…be worried about anybody saying anything” (016: 46, straight, HIV-). Another participant, who identified as “straight but experimental,” noted that while he could not see himself in an emotional relationship with a man, he did enjoy sex with men. The Internet allowed him to explore his same-sex interests while keeping his “interest in men a secret only to [himself]” (017: 21, straight, HIV?). A participant who was coming to terms with his bisexuality similarly noted, “I lived in university residence last year and there was one gay kid on our floor. I saw what everyone did to that poor fellow so I dare not to come out of the closet” (022: 20, bisexual, HIV?). For men in these situations, the Internet helped sidestep these sorts of problems, while still allowing them to explore their same-sex interests.

Again, this was not a circumstance restricted only to non-gay-identified men. For instance, a gay-identified man reflected on his constrained experiences in a smaller Ontario city while he was coming to terms with his sexual orientation: “There was one bar that had a ‘gay night’ once
a week and if I went there, *everyone would know that I was gay* [italics added]…” (003: 26, gay, HIV-).

In this way, the Internet helped assuage the tension between wanting to explore one’s same-sex interests while also needing to remain outwardly “straight.” The Internet permitted a means of information control in which these competing desires could be accommodated. The Internet played an important role here, because men’s abilities to be open about their sexual interest in men were stymied by other factors in their lives. In this sense, this particular challenge provides insight to larger structuring contexts at work, such as struggling with sexual orientation, homophobia and the social marginalization of homosexuality more generally. The Internet functioned to mediate these broader issues, and these examples demonstrate how structural factors can impact men’s experiences with the Internet for sexual purposes.

5.3.2. **Overcoming Restricted Social Connections**

Men in the study talked about their difficulties in making social connections with other men and how the Internet helped to alleviate those difficulties. On one hand, Internet communication made making connections much easier for men who felt they had difficulty doing so in offline venues. For these men, the Internet provided a venue to meet and interact with other men with less emotional investment and fewer emotional costs. For example, one of the gay-identified men reflected on his troubles in meeting partners in a bar: “I tend to be a little more shy…I don’t really approach people, very rarely do I approach people….I’m a little more uninhibited on chatting in a chat room [italics added]” (012: 42, gay, HIV-). Another similarly remarked, “I didn’t necessarily have self-confidence and the social skills to fit in that [offline] environment….So I was always self-conscious…” (007: 43, gay, HIV+).

Some men encountered similar problems with bathhouses, where they feared that they did not know enough about the contextual norms to have a successful sexual encounter. A bisexual participant, for example, explained why he has never visited a bathhouse: “I don’t really know the etiquette so I’m afraid I’d be socially awkward…or like what if some guy wants to have sex but I’m not interested?…I don’t really know how the whole thing works….I do find the idea kind of hot, but…it just seems fraught with peril” (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-).
In these cases, the Internet helped provide men a venue which made interacting easier and afforded them a measure of “interpersonal safety” at the interactional level.

But just as the Internet made connecting easier, it similarly made disconnecting easier. Online chatting eased the awkwardness of rejecting a potential partner, as well as being rejected by a potential partner. This benefit is illustrated in the following quotation from a gay-identified man, a perspective that also reveals the differences between finding a sex partner online as opposed to offline:

When you reject someone in a bathhouse it’s just…so much more because they’re right there in front of you, whereas if it’s someone online you can just not reply or just be really friendly, you know…it doesn’t hurt their feelings so much. And I guess it’s the reverse for me as well…it kind of works both ways…I’d rather be rejected online when it’s not so…I can kind of forget about the person. (008: 34, gay, HIV-)

Issues of social skills and rejections illustrate how the disembodied nature of Internet communication can provide some much appreciated “distance” to facilitate connection and rejection in a more comfortable space. These examples illustrate how the Internet fits into the lives of men who feel they do not possess the skills to connect in the offline world, thereby playing a very important role in their social and sexual networking. These examples also expose the interactional and socially-situated use of the Internet for sexual purposes: the Internet offered efficient and easy connections with other men when such connections were not easily available elsewhere in the men’s social milieu.

Along similar lines, the Internet can help provide social connections for people who are lonely (e.g., Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003). Certainly that was no exception in this study, and three men in particular spoke quite emphatically about how they felt lonely and isolated – and sometimes even desperate for a connection – due to blocked social connections, circumstances to which the Internet provided a solution.

Take, for example, the experience of one of the younger, gay-identified men in the study, during a period when he was coming to terms with his sexual orientation:
Usually I’m on there [the Internet] when I’m lonely….Some people want to hook up because they’re just horny, and some people want to hook up because they’re lonely and horny. *I know* I’ve often traded sex just to spend time with a man …when I was in [small town] I was very unhappy…I just kind of broke down and I…was stuck in [small town] and I didn’t have any friends there anymore…and then when I was in Toronto…I didn’t really have any male friends…so I’d meet guys sometimes just to spend time with them….So that’s probably why I started chatting online, I was very lonely* [italics added]. (003: 26, gay, HIV-)

In fact, for this participant, his loneliness became so serious that he reframed it as “desperation” for connection with another man; as he explained it, “I didn’t care…if I thought it was crass to meet someone online and I didn’t care if it meant I was gay…I just wanted something…it wasn’t like, ‘Oh, I’m going to go online,’ it was a desperation thing for me, definitely a desperation” (003: 26, gay, HIV-). This example is particularly rich with respect to “structuring contexts,” as it clearly illustrates the myriad of circumstances surrounding this participant’s Internet use: (1) a lack of a social network; (2) a lack of opportunities to expand his social network; (3) a subsequent strong desire for connection with another man; and (4) struggles with coming to terms with his sexual orientation. The idea of trading sex to spend time with a man also speaks to potential disempowerment in sexual negotiation, a point returned to in a later chapter.

Other participants echoed a similar sense of desperation for connection. Another gay-identified participant explicitly bemoaned his inability to find partners in the offline world, and he went online “when I can’t take it anymore and the Internet ‘bathhouse’ seems the only way out” (009: 35, gay, HIV-). One of the heterosexually-identified participants said similarly, where “loneliness primarily” led him to the Internet to find male sexual partners when female ones were unavailable, a “last chance effort” (016: 46, straight, HIV-).

In each of these cases, the Internet was a panacea to the participants’ loneliness, but it also seems that it was a solution of “last resort,” where men had to overcome their misgivings and turn to the Internet for connection. Nonetheless, the Internet was essential here because it provided a solution to the men’s needs for connection to other men. The men’s “blocked connections” in
these examples related on the surface to loneliness, but the loneliness itself was situated within other contexts, such a lack of a social network, other male friends, or opportunities for connection with other men, which in at least one case was tied more broadly to issues of coming out and homophobia. These broader factors begin to illustrate the socially-situated nature of men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes.

For a few of the men in the study, social connection with other men was blocked due to simple reasons of geography. On one hand, this was an issue of practicality. Some of the men had grown up and/or lived in small cities or rural towns, where access to a gay community – or indeed, even other men who identified as gay – was very rare. Where there was a gay community available, it usually meant a lengthy drive, which then subsequently made sexual connections more difficult. As one man put it, traditional sex-seeking venues were not available to him because “I was on a farm near a small town, pretty hard to make it to the [suburb] tower” (009: 35, gay, HIV-). In these cases, the Internet offered a solution to accessing men who were otherwise difficult or impossible to reach.

However, geography could pose barriers to accessing a gay community that transgressed the physical availability of the community. Relating back to the issue of “safety of reputation,” a number of men did not feel comfortable openly expressing their sexual interest in men in their local environs. For example, one participant recounted his experiences of living in a rural area of a mid-western American state:

I was more cautious...I was living in a small community so I wasn’t out to my neighbours or whatever....The town was 1500 people, so there’s not a lot of cruising places, and as a person who wasn’t really out yet, I didn’t really know about any cruising places. I read about these books where people would walk up and down San Francisco and if they looked twice it meant...they were interested. [I was] never really good at that sort of thing and that doesn’t really happen in [US state]. You’re supposed to be red and straight, and you try to appear straight...you’re not really giving off “come fuck me” signals [italics added]. (008: 34, gay, HIV-)
And said another, a younger bisexually-identified man who had moved to Canada from an Asian country:

I didn’t come to Toronto when I came to Canada. I went to a small town instead, and it’s a very conservative place over there so I couldn’t express myself freely [italics added]….But since I will be going back to Alberta, now I have nothing to lose. I’m thinking of visiting LGBTQO [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered organization]. I mean, I can come out of [the] closet finally and not fear the consequences because what if people say something about me? I’ll be in Alberta. (022: 20, bisexual, HIV?)

Again, in these cases the Internet offered a place to find the connections that were otherwise unavailable. Where one’s social situation restricted access to other men – either physically or metaphorically – the Internet could provide connection. Indeed many broader factors underlie these stories, such as cultural values and homophobia. Interestingly, a common denominator in these discussions was the move to a larger city and the freedom it brought, largely vis-à-vis a greater sense of anonymity. Nonetheless, the Internet continued to figure into the sexual lives of these men – to varying degrees – and continued to be influenced by other factor discussed in this section. In any case, these examples illuminate how the Internet was used as a response to the problems men faced in their social lives.

A common theme throughout this discussion is alienation from more “traditional” means of meeting other MSM, and the difficulties that reality presented for making the connections with other men that the men desired. This alienation was related to a number of issues that themselves can be related back to a more structural level, such as the physical absence of a gay community in which to participate (as a result of geography), or issues related to openness of one’s sexual identity (as a result of experiencing homophobia and the marginalization of homosexuality).

5.3.3. Disenchantment with Seeking Sex Offline

Among the men with longer histories of meeting same-sex sexual partners offline, some expressed their displeasure with their prior experiences in the gay community. For these men the
Internet provided an alternative method of meeting men that circumvented the problems they encountered in the gay “scene.”

One source of disenchantment were features of the more typical places for finding sexual partners, such as bars, bathhouses and parks. For example, a few of the participants noted their displeasure with how attending bathhouses for sex made them feel: said an older, gay-identified man, “I would have a nice experience but…I left with a kind of an empty, lonely feeling” (002: 56, gay, HIV-). A queer-identified participant reminisced how he “couldn’t handle” the bathhouse experience: “I got really sad, was shaking, and I felt it was the lowest of the lowest….I wanted something else for my life” (010: 38, queer, HIV-).

Others noted similar displeasure with bars. One participant, for example, spoke quite emphatically about his experiences: “You can go to a club or whatever, but everybody’s on drugs, drugs, drugs….muscly [sic], sweaty pigs elbowing each other out of the way” (009: 35, gay, HIV-). Likewise, a number of participants felt that they did not “fit in” to the broader gay scene and its associated venues, alluding again to a possible issue of alienation from a gay community.

Some participants were thankful that meeting men online exempted them from some of the typical behaviour required within venues and even within the dating process. With respect to the former, some participants explained that they were not drinkers or smokers, so they did not feel comfortable in the bar environment. For others, a benefit of meeting partners online was circumventing some of the pro forma steps to a sexual encounter, as for this gay-identified participant: “you don’t have to do anything social with them, you don’t even have to have a drink with them, or ask for a date or anything like that” (007: 43, gay, HIV+).

To this end, there was a sense of safety and reassurance in the fact that online relations were often “disposable” and required little investment:

> With any interaction online you have more control. If I don’t like the person I can just never respond, or block them, or whatever and there is no repercussion to me. That is not the case in person. So [online] I can screen and select someone at my leisure and I can
dictate whatever terms I want and the worst thing that can happen is the other person tells me to fuck off. (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-)

Beyond the nature of individual venues, some men were discontented with the nature of gay culture itself:

There’s this whole sexual culture that feeds on itself…and they all know these rules and where you’re supposed to be at certain points and I’m just like…wow…..In the offline world, everybody’s too fucking busy being a supermodel, nobody even looks at each other [or] talks to each other any more. They’re so busy trying to get themselves to that moment on the TV screen or the magazine…. seems so pretentious and superficial sometimes. (009: 35, gay, HIV-)

Another participant similarly noted that he does not spend much time in the gay community or its associated venues because he feels a disconnect with the others who participate there: “I sometimes even feel that due to my job and interests in politics and development, others my age have their minds set on entertainment and other guy issues that I really don’t have time for” (019: 28, gay, HIV+). Here again there is a sense of alienation from the gay community, but of a somewhat different sort than previously discussed. Whereas in the preceding section, alienation was “externally” imposed (i.e., having problems connecting in the gay community), in this case the alienation resulted from a deliberate rejection of the gay scene and what it entailed.

Participants also expressed concern about physical safety related to public sex seeking environments, such as parks as washrooms. For these men, the Internet offered a much safer place to find sexual partners. Said one gay-identified participant of seeking sex in parks, “I heard… cases of people being beaten up or killed…you could be attacked in a park or even a street” (007: 43, gay, HIV+). In a similar way, a bisexual participant noted he has not visited bathhouses or parks because “I am mildly concerned about being assaulted or raped, which can’t happen online, only after you make the decision to meet someone in RL [real life]” (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-).
For two of the non-gay-identified men, their beliefs about the “nature” of men who sought sex in bathhouses and/or parks kept them from attending those venues. As one of the two men noted, “Bathhouses…I would be afraid of getting some STD [sexually transmitted disease]” (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-). At the same time, both of these men indicated that they were not otherwise involved in the gay community in any capacity, so these examples may relate more to a “fear” of the community more generally because of issues related to struggling with their sexual orientation.

These examples further illustrate how the Internet “fits” into the sexual lives of MSM. For the men in the examples cited above, the Internet was not simply “another place” to find sex; it was rather a place to find sex that overcame or circumvented problems they had experienced in finding sex in more traditional sex-seeking venues. These men’s previous experiences and interactions brought differing levels of disenchantment with the gay community, to which the Internet offered a viable alternative. In this way, the use of the Internet for sexual purposes is clearly socially-situated, insofar as these men’s social experiences – and related displeasure with them – brought them to the Internet to find sexual connection with other men. Men’s displeasure acts as a window into their experiences with the sometimes unwelcoming nature of gay communities.

Finally, men highlighted how meeting sexual partners online helped resolve some of the more practical challenges they experienced in finding sex offline.

Scheduling, for example, was a major practical matter the Internet helped accommodate. Some participants noted that it was easier to find a sex partner online any time of the day, which would be difficult in other settings (e.g., bars would be closed; too early for parks; bathhouses less busy during the day). The Internet also helped facilitate sexual encounters when weather was not cooperative; it was easier for men to find partners who would come to them, rather than having to brave the elements to go to a bar or bathhouse or when it was too cold to look for sex in parks. In this way the Internet helped increase the accessibility of sexual encounters.

Living arrangements were another issue the Internet helped manage. Two of the participants, for example, were living with their partners in open relationships. The relatively quick and efficient nature of finding partners online allowed these men to schedule sexual encounters at their homes when their relationship partners were out. Another participant talked about this particular
benefit, although he exploited it to cheat on his partner while he was out of the house (i.e., the two did not have an open relationship).

Numerous other issues were mentioned by the participants. Access to technology, of course, played a role in men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes. Financial issues did as well: a couple of participants noted that they did not have the financial resources to go to bars or bathhouses – or they did not wish to spend money on those places – and the Internet provided a useful, and cheaper, alternative. The time available to use the Internet for sexual purposes was also a factor; some men talked about using the Internet for sexual purposes only when workloads – from employment or school – permitted. However, the opposite was true there as well, where some men talked about work and/or leisure time suffering due to Internet use for sexual purposes – an issue which is returned to later in this thesis.

In these ways, the Internet emerged as a pliable and accommodating venue that could help overcome practical issues of sex-seeking that men encountered in their offline experiences.

5.3.4. Improving the Sex Seeking Experience

Some of the men in the sample – mostly men who were gay-identified and older – had long(er) histories of participating in the gay community and felt quite comfortable doing so. While they may have been disenchanted with some aspects of the community, they nonetheless continued to meet partners there. For these men, the Internet was an adjunct sex seeking venue, for a number of reasons.

Some participants had simply been meeting sexual partners long before the Internet came onto the sex-seeking scene, and they found no need to cease looking for partners in these venues. These men saw the Internet as merely “another way” (011: 61, gay, HIV+) and a “secondary source” (014: 48, gay, HIV+) for finding partners.

Other reasons for seeking sex elsewhere related to the nature of Internet sex seeking and the resulting sexual encounter. For example, one participant noted that he wanted to experience sexual encounters where he could be more “vulnerable,” and he felt that the Internet sexual encounter, with its primary and immediate focus on casual sex, could not fill that need (003: 26, gay, HIV-). In a somewhat similar way, some of the participants more seasoned in the gay scene
preferred to find sexual encounters with more of a random element, in the course of doing other things, such as enjoying a day at the beach, where a sexual encounter was a distinct possibility, but not the sole motivation. Two participants sought sex in other venues when they became tired of, as one put it, the “mind games and drama” online (018: 23, unidentified, HIV-).

That being said, men who found partners in a multitude of venues nonetheless found some unique benefits of seeking sex online. Two participants, for example, found it easier to find the specialized partners they were seeking. One participant was interested in exhibitionism, and found it easier to find and connect with exhibitionists online. Another was sometimes interested in only webcam experiences, and the Internet allowed him to easily and efficiently find similarly-minded partners.

Taken together, these stories highlight the varied contexts which surrounded the men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives, which also influenced what the Internet meant to them and how it fit into their sexual lives.

5.4. A Typology of Men’s Internet Use for Sexual Purposes

This section proposes a typology of Internet use for sexual purposes among MSM, based on the preceding discussions of the purpose of the Internet use as well as its “fit” within the men’s sexual lives. Such a model is necessary to help think about the different ways in which MSM engage with the Internet for sexual purposes and what it means to them, for the purposes of HIV prevention.

This typology considers men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes as it enters into their sexual careers. The typology is based on the “maturity” of men’s sexual careers – that is, whether they are more or less experienced in same-sex relations and involvement with the “gay scene” – and where the Internet entered into those sexual careers.

5.4.1. MSM with “Mature” Sexual Careers

Seventeen of the participants are best characterized as having a more “mature” sexual career. As the name suggests, these men had long(er) histories of same-sex relations, including sex with men and participation in gay communities. As might be expected, all but two of the men in this category identified as gay. Of the two men who were non-gay-identified, one participant refused
to answer the question about sexual identity and the other participant identified as bisexual, but only because he still had an interest in women, although he had not had sexual relations with a woman for some time.

These participants had broad sexual interests in other men, both for casual sexual encounters and sustained intimate relationships. Many of these men had had long-term relationships with men; two men were currently in one. These men had met sexual partners online as well as in more traditional venues such as bars, bathhouses, parks, through friends, and so on. They tended to have strong knowledge about safer sex and its practice. These men also had much experience with sexual relations with other men, sometimes in the hundreds of partners.

With respect to their sexual uses of the Internet, these men tended to use it more for actual sexual purposes than for purposes of sexual education or exploration. Such use is probably a reflection of their familiarity with sex seeking and safer sex behaviour and knowledge. Since these men were already largely embedded in the gay scene and had much prior experience meeting partners in it, the Internet played a less important role in discovering or exploring their sexuality.

Nonetheless, the Internet still took on different importance and meaning in the lives of these men. For some of these men, the Internet came to function as an *adjunct* method of meeting sexual partners. With respect to solving challenges in the men’s sex lives, these men were mostly those who looked to the Internet to supplement their sex seeking experiences in other venues.

On the other hand, the Internet for some men came to be a *preferred* source for meeting partners. Men who used the Internet as their preferred source tended to discuss issues of using the Internet to improve their sexual seeking experience, usually to deal with blocked social connections or disenchantment with their experiences in finding sexual partners in offline venues.

### 5.4.2. MSM with Less “Mature” Sexual Careers

The remaining men in the sample are best described as having an “inexperienced” or nascent sexual career with same-sex relations. For many of these men, the Internet provided their entrée into same-sex relations, by permitting them to explore their budding sexual interest in men and,
in some cases, providing them with their first—and sometimes only—offline sexual connections with other men.

Unlike the men with more mature sexual careers, these men had little experience with same-sex relations. For instance, some of these men had only had sex with one or two other men; in one case, the participant did not have any sexual experience with males or females. Overall, these men had much less sexual experience than those men categorized above. Likewise, these men had even less experience with participation in a “gay community.” There was a general knowledge of safer sex practice among these men, but some of them expressed questions and misunderstandings about it.

These men were more likely to talk about using the Internet for sexual education and sexual exploration. They largely spoke about issues relating to “safety of reputation” and blocked social connections as the situating factors in their use of the Internet for sexual purposes.

Just as it did for the group of “experienced” men, the Internet came to play two different roles in the sexual lives of these men. In some cases, the Internet provided their first connection with other men and remained their exclusive connection with other men. For instance, two of the men did not participate in any type of gay community or “scene,” and the Internet was their sole source of connection with other men for sexual purposes. These men were both non-gay-identified: one identified as bisexual and one identified as heterosexual.

These particular men had very limited and specialized sexual interest in other men. The bisexual participant, for example, had only a sexual interest in transsexuals, but not in men more generally. However, he had not had any sexual experience with transsexuals, nor, in fact, any sexual experiences at all with men or women. Similarly, the heterosexually-identified participant used the Internet to find male sexual partners under very specific circumstances: when he was unable to find a female partner, and usually under the influence of alcohol and/or drug abuse. He had engaged only in oral sex with other men, and never anal sex.

While these men used the Internet to explore same-sex relations, they did not regard it as a “lifestyle” or a portal into homosexual life. They did not seek men for sexual purposes in any other venues.
On the other hand, some men used the Internet for their first sexual connections with other men, but felt more of a desire and/or allegiance to participating in “gay life.” Four men fell into this category. These men were also non-gay-identified: three identified as bisexual and one as heterosexual but “experimental” (017: 21, straight, HIV?). These men had little experience in the gay scene. However, some of the men indicated that they would have interest in attending venues such as gay bars, bathhouses and/or parks to meet sexual partners.

These men also demonstrated more of a broader interest in other men. While some of the men had relationships with women, all but one of them noted they would consider a romantic relationship with another man. The “straight but experimental” participant noted that he could not see himself in an emotional relationship with a man; however, he noted nearer the close of the interview that he was indeed “getting more and more into guys” (017: 21, straight, HIV?).

In either case, the men with less mature sexual careers spoke emphatically about the importance of the Internet to their sexual lives and development. The Internet provided these men with their first contacts and experiences with other men in a sexual realm. Further, the Internet continued to make available to them their only connection with other men for sexual purposes; as one participant put it, “my sex life centres around the net…I’d be a lost soul [without it]” (001: 32, bisexual, HIV-).

Accordingly, men with less experience tended to use the Internet to respond to issues of tensions about their sexual orientation and blocked social connections. While these men would use the Internet to find sexual partners, in many cases sexual education and sexual exploration were more important to them than actual offline encounters.

This typology is important as it draws attention to the different experiences men have in using the Internet in their sexual lives, related to where the Internet entered into their sexual careers. From an HIV prevention perspective, this typology is useful in acknowledging that a “one size fits all” approach to prevention on the Internet will not be successful as it will not resonate with the experiences of the varied group of men that use the Internet in their sexual lives. It should be recognized that this typology was based on a cross-sectional view of how the Internet fit into the sexual lives of the men in the sample and progression through the typology is, of course, possible and expected. For instance, men with more mature sexual careers may waffle between the Internet as adjunct and preferred sources, and men with less developed sexual careers may turn
to Internet as adjunct or preferred source as their experience and familiarity grows in the gay community; or, they may stick with it as an exclusive source of connection with men.

5.5. Discussion

This chapter relates to two objectives of the study: objective one, on how men use the Internet for sexual purposes and objective two, examining how men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes is situated within their broader social and sexual lives.

With respect to the first objective, this chapter opened with a discussion of the various ways in which men used the Internet for sexual purposes. These purposes included using the Internet to arrange offline meetings for sex, the predominant reason for being online. However, men also used the Internet for self-stimulation by accessing sexually explicit materials, cybersex, and webcamming. Beyond these uses, the Internet provided a place for men who were relatively new to same-sex sexual relations to explore their budding sexual interests and learn more about the mechanics of same-sex sex as well as the practice of safer sex.

Other qualitative work in this area reports similar findings (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Engler et al., 2005; Sanders, 2008). The use of the Internet for actual and simulated sexual experiences are quite obvious uses and highlight the role of the Internet for the basic purposes of sexual networking. However, the use of the Internet for sexual exploration and sexual education are important to note, because they expand the notion of the Internet as simply a venue for finding sex partners. These uses of the Internet demonstrate that it provides a new venue for learning about same-sex sexual relations, one which may come to play a larger role as the Internet becomes more ubiquitous in the lives of MSM, an issue returned to in a later chapter.

The second part of this chapter related to the second objective of the study, to investigate the intersections between men’s use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes and their broader social and sexual lives. To this end, men in the sample constructed the Internet as a “solution” to problems they encountered in their “offline” lives. In some cases, men experienced tensions related to the desire to express or explore their interest in same-sex relations while also wanting to remain outwardly heterosexual; the Internet provided these men a place to achieve both goals. Some men experienced blocked social connections, either due to needing to keep their interest in men a secret or also due to perceived deficits in their social skills and a lack of opportunities for
meeting other gay men/MSM. In these cases, the Internet offered a place to connect with other men while overcoming restrictive issues such as shyness, isolation and geographic distance. Other men who had more participation in gay communities had grown weary of their experiences meeting partners in those communities, and the Internet offered to them a venue that helped improve their sex seeking experience and overcame their disenchantment with the traditional offline sex seeking venues. Finally, some men who had much experience meeting partners both online and offline found that the Internet did indeed merely provide another venue for finding sex partners.

Other research found similar reasons for men’s turning to the Internet to find sex partners. Brown et al. (2005) found that the Internet offered the men in their study a variety of venues and alternatives to traditional sex seeking venues. Likewise, the Internet was the first entry point into gay communities for some of the men in the study by Engler et al. (2005), and it also helped men overcome issues of shyness and dislike of traditional gay sex-seeking venues. Sanders (2008) also found that the Internet was a venue for sexual exploration, a “portal into distant” gay communities for men isolated from them (p. 269), and a place which eased social connections for men who felt they had difficulties in that regard.

However, while these studies identified these reasons for using the Internet, they did not specifically situate these uses within broader, structuring contexts in the men’s lives. As this chapter argued, the sorts of “problems” to which the Internet offered a “solution” are, in many cases, proxies for larger factors situating the men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes. For instance, while some of the problems related to very concrete problems – such as physical isolation from a gay community – others related to more structural factors. The role of the Internet in exploring a budding same-sex interest, for example, can be related more broadly to issues of homophobia and the marginalization of homosexuality, which relegate men to expressing their same-sex interests in anonymous settings and furtive casual encounters. Men who find it difficult to connect in the offline gay community or who are disenchanted by it may be responding to the strict codes of behaviour and norms of participation in the gay community, which can exclude men who do not meet the narrow criteria of youth and beauty that the community norms dictate. The overarching implication is that men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives is related to broader issues in their lives, which may have implications for their sexual risk management and behaviour.
This fact is perhaps particularly important to non-gay-identified men and/or other men who are relatively new to same-sex relations. As noted in the literature review, men who are not gay-identified can have very different same-sex sexual trajectories. For example, one study demonstrated that young bisexual Latino men were more likely to report multiple male sex partners, higher numbers of sex partners, more incidences of unprotected anal sex and greater substance abuse than their gay-identified counterparts (Agronick et al., 2004). Another study showed that men who engaged in sex with other men before coming-out reported greater numbers of lifetime male sex partners; more casual sex partners; more STDs; and more unprotected anal sex with casual partners (Schindhelm & Hospers, 2004; see also Dubé, 2000).

The importance of understanding the context of men’s Internet use for sexual purposes is further underlined in the study by Poon et al. (2005). Their work, as highlighted in the literature review, is an exception to the other studies in that it does consider more structural issues in the use of the Internet among their study participants. For instance, their study showed that their participants, 21 Asian MSM in Toronto, turned to the Internet because of a lack of positive “offline” spaces for Asian MSM to socialize with other MSM. Further, their participants’ online experiences were structured by discourse about race and the stereotypical views of Asian men in the gay community. They showed how these broader structural issues could ultimately play a role in sexual risk behaviour.

The important point in each of these cases is that Internet use must be understood within the contexts of the men’s lives more broadly. It is necessary to go beyond surface “problems” to investigate how those problems themselves are situated within larger structural factors. Hence this chapter introduced the concept of “structuring contexts,” which represent exactly these structural factors which surround men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes. These “structuring contexts” are very important to acknowledge, because they may come later to play a role in sexual risk management and behaviour, as argued in subsequent chapters.

The final section of this chapter proposed a typology of men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes. Previous qualitative work in this area has likewise shown that men have varying reasons for being online and experiences in doing so (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Engler et al., 2005; Davis et al., 2006a, 2006b; Sanders, 2008). However, these studies have not
systematically considered where the Internet fits into the sexual careers of MSM and the potential implications of the timing of that entrance.

The typology proposed here was based on men’s sexual careers and specifically where the Internet entered and fit into those careers. It showed that for some men, the Internet entered into a sexual career that was already quite mature. For others, the Internet entered into a less developed sexual career and in some cases, the availability of the Internet marked the beginning of a same-sex sexual career. Use of the Internet for sexual purposes tended to differ depending on the maturity of the sexual career. For men with longer histories of same-sex relations, the Internet came to play more of an adjunct role, although it could also play a preferred role for men disenchanted with their experiences in the gay community. For men with less developed sexual careers, the Internet was more of a tool for sexual exploration and education, especially in the basic mechanics of male-male sex and safer sex practice. Indeed, recent research from the UK found an increase in the number of younger MSM who use the Internet to meet their first sexual partners, with a concomitant decline in the number of MSM who met their first partner in more traditional offline venues (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2007).

Such a typology is important because it draws attention to the fact that the Internet can play very different roles in the lives of MSM, depending on their experience and experiences with same-sex sexual relationships. Men also approach the Internet for sexual purposes from very different “structuring contexts.” Taken together, both approaches are vitally important to understanding men’s behaviour online and its implications for HIV prevention because they provide a more comprehensive perspective on the role of the Internet in the men’s lives. Differing “structuring contexts” may mean different online interactions and experiences in offline sexual settings, thus it is important to investigate the breadth and depth of how the Internet fits into the lives of MSM, especially in light of their other social contexts.

Brown et al. (2005) importantly note that HIV prevention initiatives “need to approach the Internet in an innovative and community-grounded approach…an approach that respects and understands the range of meanings and purposes for the medium” (p. 72). The only way to do so is to take a more comprehensive view of the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM, especially one which accounts for the contexts in which that use is situated, if prevention initiatives are to be truly “grounded” in those experiences. Accordingly, the next chapters
consider specifically how “structuring contexts” play a role in the pre-meeting and physical meeting stages of the search for sexual partners online among the men in the study.
Chapter 6
Presenting Selves and Constructing Others: The Situated Nature of the Online Sexual Search

6.1. Chapter Overview

The previous chapter introduced the concept of “structuring contexts,” illustrating some of the structural factors and circumstances that surrounded men’s use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes. This chapter and the next highlight the “structuring contexts” that emerged from the participants’ stories of their use of the Internet in their sexual lives.

This chapter relates to the second and third objectives of this study, to examine how men’s experiences in finding a sexual partner online and negotiating the sexual encounter are socially-situated and may influence their understandings and management of sexual risk. The analysis presented here uses a dramaturgical frame, based on the work of Erving Goffman (1959), to explore an interactionist perspective on men’s experiences in their online interactions.

Following the underlying structural interactionist drive of the study, it takes this analysis further to consider how men’s online interactions are situated within broader structures, and asks what insight this perspective brings to HIV prevention.

The first section of this chapter looks at the process of finding a sexual partner online, with a focus on how men presented themselves and constructed their potential partners in their online interactions. The second section of the chapter examines how men negotiated sexual safety in these interactions through similar means. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the implications of these findings.

6.2. Finding a Sexual Partner

The typical process of finding a sexual partner online encompassed these steps: (1) choosing a sexual partner; (2) negotiating the meeting and sexual activities; and (3) meeting in the physical sexual encounter.15 This chapter focuses on the first two steps of this process.

15 Please note that this model is a somewhat idealized one for analytical purposes.
Once online, the first step to finding sex on the Internet was locating a desired and compatible sexual partner. The men in the study used a number of different websites to locate their sexual partners. The most popular places were gay.com as well as more explicitly sexually-specific websites, such as dudesnude.com or men4sexnow.com. Where gay.com offered synchronous chatting (where the chats proceeded “live”), other websites tend to work through an asynchronous e-mail messaging system (where men would send messages and await a reply). Some of the men had been meeting partners online for quite some time, and they talked about finding partners on bulletin board systems (BBS’s, precursors to the Internet) and early Internet chat groups.

The processes involved in finding a partner were similar across all of the sites the men used to find sexual partners. This section focuses on the processes the men used in attracting and choosing a partner for an offline sexual encounter. Two central themes emerged here: (1) presenting a legitimized “electronic self” and (2) constructing the potential partner.

Other qualitative work in this area has considered similar processes (e.g., Davis et al., 2006a, 2006b; Brown et al., 2005; Engler et al., 2005). However, this chapter takes a closer look at these processes, to problematize some of the concepts from the previous research with respect to the potential implications of these processes on sexual behaviour, as well as demonstrate how these processes must be understood with respect to the broader social context within which they are situated.

6.2.1. Attracting the Desired Partner: Online Fronts and Legitimated Performances

In the online sexual search, one’s “first impression” to potential partners is usually made by one’s “bioline”\(^{16}\) and/or one’s online profile. Accordingly, men talked both implicitly and explicitly about how they fashioned their online entities to attract and entice their ideal sexual partner. In this way, the men actively engaged in “impression management” in the Goffmanian (1959) sense, where they attempted to present a certain front to attract the partners and/or sexual

\(^{16}\) A bioline provides a short description of the chatter, usually accompanied by a “thumbnail” picture, visible by others as they scroll through participants in a chatroom.
encounters they sought. To bring Goffman’s seminal concept into the Internet age, this process might better be called the “e-presentation of self,” as men fashioned an online front in their search for a sexual partner.

Unlike sex seeking in the offline world, the Internet permitted men to manage specific aspects of their online “self” to attract the sort of partner and/or sexual encounter they sought. In this way, men used Internet-specific tools such as their online profile or chat bioline to specify the sort of partner they were looking for. In almost all cases, these fronts described what the men sought in their partners, with specifics for typical criteria such as age, race, aesthetics and sexual roles: “I’m really specific on my ad, no body fat, this is what I like… I even say, no offence but I’m only into blah blah blah, you know, I figure again, be honest…. It’s like I don’t go and cruise other tops online because I read the ads, I don’t want another top” (004: 41, gay, HIV+).

The ease with which men could stipulate specific sexual desires was of particular interest to the men in the sample with more specialized sexual interests, such as exhibitionism or bondage. For these men, the Internet offered a unique and efficient method of presenting an electronic front which could be clearly fashioned to attract like-minded partners. For example, one participant who enjoyed exhibitionism talked about the ease of using the Internet to find other exhibitionists:

It’s a great way of exposing myself to people… who wouldn’t really have a consequence on my job… I could walk the streets of the Internet nude, much easier than I could walk down Yonge Street [a main street in downtown Toronto] nude… It’s easier for me to do it with the Internet because you can just click “exhibitionism” in the profile… (006: 47, gay, HIV-)

The benefit of this aspect of the Internet is clear from a practical perspective. This participant’s story demonstrates how it is possible to present a very pointed and specific online persona as developed through one’s profile and pictures. From a broader perspective, this example also demonstrates how the Internet can help liberate sexual interests and facilitate their expression in a safer environment than doing so offline.

Goffman theorized “front” and “back” regions in social interaction. In the “front” region, social actors present an idealized self, while in social actors kept in the “back” all those thoughts,
behaviours and so on which needed to be hidden from the “front” (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). In this case, specialized interests, such as exhibitionism or sado-masochism – which some may consider “deviant” sexual behaviour – may be expressed more freely in the relatively anonymous online environment. This idea is reminiscent of the “safety of reputation” issue discussed earlier. It could also apply to other situations, such as men who seek “barebacking” partners online, a practice which might be considered wrong or dangerous from a public health perspective and therefore a “back” region interest.

That being said, men in the sample did not have carte blanche in presenting their online selves. Instead, how men presented their selves online could be implicitly influenced by the men’s broader experiences and interactions and the cultural context in which those constructions took place. Take, for instance, the story of one of the older participants, a Caucasian man who sought sex partners in chatroom aimed at Asian men:

I don’t have one of these things [a bioline], “top looking for bottom”…so basically I’m there [in the chatroom] almost exclusively looking for somebody to private me. Because basically in the Asian room where I spend most of my time, I’m older than most of them want, so I don’t tend to make a nuisance of myself, chasing after these young guys….I don’t build up a reputation in the Asian room of being…this aggressive old guy privating everybody, every new face that comes in the room….I don’t like being painted with the same brush as many of the Caucasian guys that I see that are really blunt and to the point, I just let it evolve [italics added]. (002: 56, gay, HIV-)

This example is rich in illustrations of the situated nature of men’s online interactions. Threaded throughout this participant’s story are discourses of age and race as they exist in the gay community. For instance, the gay community is known to prize youth and accordingly devalue older men (Adam, 2000; Brown et al., 2001; Green, 2008; Murray & Adam, 2001), where older men are often viewed as “predators” of younger men. The race issue is also at play here, where older men interested in younger Asian men are pejoratively perceived as “rice queens,”
Caucasian men who have a particular and specific interest in Asian men, where the Asian men are expected to play a passive and effeminate role (see, e.g., Chuang, 1999).

This participant talks about his perception that he is too old to be attractive to most of the men in the room, and that he does not want to be perceived by others in the room as being the “typical” Caucasian male. He alters his online behaviour accordingly to meet this goal, by passively waiting to be messaged instead of actively pursuing men he might find interesting.

To return again to Goffman’s concepts, this participant was quite careful about both what he “gives” and “gives off” through his profile and his actions in the chatroom. He is not “blunt” in the descriptions of what he is seeking (the given) nor does he aggressively pursue younger men in the room (the given off). This presents a clear illustration of how online interaction can be situated within broader structures. In this case, the participant’s online interactions are situated within and influenced in turn by the context in which it occurs – one where there are discourses about what constitutes “proper” behaviour with respect to age and race in the sexual search. These discourses form part of the “structuring contexts” which influence online behaviour, demonstrating limits on one’s self expression online.

This is also an expression of some foundational symbolic interactionist concepts, such as the “generalized other” and “taking the role of the other,” where this participant alters his behaviour with respect to how he believes he will be perceived by other men in the chatroom, a perspective learned through his previous experiences and interactions. Taken together, a structural interactionist viewpoint is clear: men’s previous interactions can structure future ones, in the context within which those structures (such as discourse) exist. Moreover, this example shows how these offline discourses can be enacted and reproduced in the online environment.

To this end, men spoke more generally about the need to learn the appropriate “rules” of constructing their electronic fronts to attract a successful encounter, and apply them in turn. For example, one man told the following story about putting together his online profile:

You can put in a little bioline, so I'll put my age, my height, my weight, my stats…*which is how big your dick is* [italics added]. And then anything else you want to put in stat wise, like…there’s this one-percentage of body fat…body mass index. That one I
don’t even know how to do, but a lot of guys do that one…OK, my
nipple’s getting fat! It just kills me….They’re so brutal, they’re
brutal. (009: 35, gay, HIV-)

This example is interesting on a number of fronts. First, it illustrates the existence of norms in the online world about how to present one’s “self”: this participant notes that when presenting one’s “stats,” the information of interest to potential partners is the size of one’s penis, an observation suggesting a socialization process of learning how to “correctly” present one’s self online. Issues of norms and socialization speak to the existence of what might be an online sex-seeking subculture. Indeed, in their accounts men alluded to “learning the system,” which included learning where to go to find sexual partners, learning the proper argot, and learning how to successfully present one’s self, as in this example; this issue is returned to in a later chapter.

Second, reflected in this participants’ account is his perspective on the importance of beauty in the gay community, which has been known to elevate aesthetics to paramount priority (Adam et al., 2000; Green, 2008; Jones, 2005; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000). Taken together, this example illustrates how men’s online selves can be truly “situated selves,” influenced by online norms and contexts which themselves can be influenced by offline discourse.

In another poignant example, one man talked about answering a question on his profile about his mannerisms: “I’m looking for masculine, butch. And everyone is. And no one puts feminine….And that’s sort of the way it is online [italics added]. And when I first went online, people would be like, ‘are you masc[uline]?’ and I was like, not really…and then I realized that, in that context, yes, I am” (003: 26, gay, HIV-). In this example, how the participant portrayed his “self” online became influenced by the norms of the online world, and through his own interactions where he learned that “everyone” looks for “masculine” men and to identify as anything else might jeopardize chances at finding a partner. Particularly interesting in this example is how this participant had to adjust his online performance against how he actually perceived himself in order to offer a front that could be legitimized in this particular setting. This example again speaks to a process where men adjust their online self according to how they believe they will be perceived by others.

Taken together, these examples expand the notion of “structuring contexts.” On one hand, the participants’ remarks about the need to present certain physical and behavioural attributes hints
at how the gay community’s larger interests in aesthetics translate into the online world, thus showing how “offline” contexts structure online behaviour. On the other hand, these examples also show the existence of “rules” that men seeking sex online must learn about presenting their selves. Thus the “structuring contexts” have two dimensions: the influences of the contexts in which the Internet use is situated, as well as the influence of the contexts and norms that exist in the subcultural online world. A successful sexual search often requires online performances that are legitimized according to the prevailing online norms.

Part of the process of the presentation of self also involved dictating the desired terms of a sexual encounter. For example:

Sometimes I’ll want to have sex but I want it to be…over an hour at least….and I’ll want to make out and I’ll want like lots of body contact. *And if that’s what I want...you know, you ask for that. I’ll say, I want relaxed fun, easy-going, you know, you try and use those words…and people who are looking for something really fast will see those words and be like, ok, obviously that’s not what he’s looking for* [italics added]. (003: 26, gay, HIV-)

Again here a similar process is at work: the participant talks about learning how to use the correct words in his presentation of self to attract the sort of encounter he desires. This example also speaks to the efficiency that the Internet provides to the sex seeking process: in an offline venue, such as a bar, it might be difficult to dictate such specific desires for a sexual encounter. Online, however, it is possible to almost automate such requests and weed out partners who would not qualify.

Another opportunity the Internet afforded men was the ability to present renewed and/or multiple fronts in their search for compatible partners. This theme is discussed separately, since it reflects a distinct opportunity afforded by the Internet, where cyberspace provides unique and various settings for men to manipulate and legitimate numerous fronts to attract desired partners.

Two men explicitly mentioned strategies that could be considered examples of “renewing” online fronts. For one man, the reinvention of his online self was a strategy to reignite a languishing search for partners. He explained how when he was first online looking for sex, he
became a “known commodity” after a long period of use. However, when he returned to the chatrooms after a prolonged absence while he was in a relationship, he posted “with a new ID [and] all of a sudden I was like somebody new, and it was just…it didn’t rain but it poured” (002: 56, gay, HIV-).

For another participant, reinventing his online identity was a reflection of his changing goals for his Internet use: “It’s [his online profile] a little more sexual than I think I would like…I think it’s time to update and sort of say a little bit more about what I’m actually like…” (004: 41, gay, HIV+). Both of these examples demonstrate the malleability of fronts as presented online. The ability to alter one’s “front” would not be so easily possible or so efficient in the offline sex-seeking world. In this sense there is a freedom of expression of self online; nonetheless, men’s performances of self still needed to be legitimated in the context within which they were presented.

Some men also talked about maintaining multiple online selves, each with a different purpose. For example, said the participant talked about earlier who was looking for fellow exhibitionists:

   My display pic[ture] is always one of nakedness or something like that….I have two MSN [Microsoft Messenger] accounts, so there’s the official one [italics added] for family and professional workers and stuff like that and then there’s the one I’m just constantly nude on all the time…and just attract attention that way. (006: 47, gay, HIV-)

This example speaks not only to the ability to maintain multiple online fronts, but also the ability to maintain parallel streams of one’s “self,” for different purposes. In this case, the participant’s family, friends and work colleagues knew one particular offline and online front of the participant. However, these same people were kept from his alternative, online exhibitionist front, which was available to those in the online world, who may (or may not) eventually come to know the offline self. Thus while offline and online worlds may intersect, it is also possible to keep separate those very connections through the maintenance of multiple online selves.

Non-gay-identified participants found themselves in similar situations. As discussed earlier, the Internet allowed these men a place for exploring their same-sex desires while maintaining a
heterosexual performance in the offline world. The Internet thus offered men a setting to present a front that demonstrated interest in sex with other men, with little consequence to their more generally accepted heterosexual performance for other audiences, both online and off.

Along similar lines were the experiences of a younger bisexual man, which again illustrates how the Internet can facilitate multiple fronts for different purposes:

I have a few different ads. I have one on collarme.com which is sort of just a general BDSM [bondage / sado-masochism] type of ad…I have two on men4sexnow.com, which is [to] attract responses from guys, I have one on bondage.com which is more of a heterosexual ad, and I have one on plentyoffish.com which is a heterosexual ad. (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-)

This particular story is interesting on two fronts. First, it demonstrates how men can present numerous fronts for different purposes, again suggesting a pliability of self not as easily achieved offline. This participant, for example, constructed three online fronts, each with a different function: one looking for female partners, one looking male partners, and one looking for a certain type of sexual encounter.

Second, this case illustrates how the Internet provides different settings to legitimize different performances of self. For instance, websites such as collarme.com or bondage.com clearly imply a specific type of sexual encounter involving bondage; men4sexnow.com likewise implies an immediate casual same-sex sexual encounter; and plentyoffish.com, a heterosexual-focused dating website, which suggests more long-term relationship development. Each of these cyber-settings dictates guidelines about what “selves” can be legitimized. For example, an advertisement for a man seeking casual sex with another man would be out of place on a heterosexual dating website, but not on a site for arranging casual sexual encounters among MSM.

Thus in these cases the Internet provides the tools and settings for the creation and presentation of multiple fronts with multiple purposes, sometimes simultaneously. But again, these presentations of self are nonetheless constrained by other factors, including the need to protect anonymity, the norms of online sex seeking, as well as the norms and discourses operating in the
offline gay community. In sum, the Internet offers unique abilities for presenting the self and attracting the desire partner in the sexual search; but, at the same time, performances of self online are themselves situated within and influenced by broader structures.

6.2.2. Constructing the Desired Partner

In addition to presenting their own online “selves,” men were also engaged in a process of “constructing” or understanding their potential partner, likewise through the “front” that partner presented online. Men were centrally concerned with meeting partners that they felt they had some level of compatibility with. Part of this process included their interpretation of other men’s portrayal of their selves. Compatibility in this sense encompassed notions such as personality and chemistry, in addition to the more practical matters of sexual compatibility, including (especially) physical attraction, sexual roles and the type of encounter.

Like their own “e-presentations” of self, men’s constructions of potential partners were structured by their previous interactions and by discourses in the gay community. A particularly strong illustration of the intersection of discourses on age and race and online interaction is found again with the older man and his experiences in the Asian chatroom, as introduced earlier. He noted:

With Oriental [sic] Asians…*there’s a certain personality*….so I feel quite safe and secure….*I’m far more nervous* when a young Caucasian privates me, “what’s their game?” whereas I’ve discovered that there’s a certain, very often in the Asian….a *genuine interest in some of the older*, more mature men, there’s no ulterior motive, *whereas I’m very hesitant* to meet younger white guys [italics added]. (002: 56, gay, HIV-)

At play in this case are the participant’s past experiences with intersections of race and age in his own interactions, where he constructs younger Caucasian as suspicious and Asian as trustworthy; these experiences combine to structure the online interaction. Further, as earlier, he talked about not “making himself a nuisance” by actively pursuing younger men in the chatrooms, but:
The exception I make to that is if I’m in the “Mature” [chat]room, and somebody that’s of my liking comes into that room...the feeling is that they’re almost fair game [italics added], if they’re in a room that’s frequented by mostly older guys, they must be interested in somebody older, so occasionally I will private them. (002: 56, gay, HIV-)

Thus here the participant constructs the potential interest of a partner based on what that partner has “given off” – if the potential partner is in a “mature” room, then that potential partner must be interested in older men, so pursuing him is appropriate and less likely to result in rejection on the basis of age. Here the online settings—and the norms and expectations that accompany them—allow constructions and impressions of the other to be made both actively and passively. Again here the offline and online contexts come to structure men’s definitions of the situation in their online sexual searches.

The initial online conversation with a potential partner was oftentimes seen as the deciding factor in fit of personality and possible chemistry. Despite the ostensible focus on sex in these initial connections, direct and abrupt sexual questioning by a potential partner was often seen as an interaction ender: “if the first question they ask is how hung are you, I usually pass….That would be an indication that they’re not interested in me, they’re just interested in my dick” (005: 49, gay, HIV+). The attention paid to the conversation itself was also important in deciding fit: “I’m not looking for a commitment online, but it’s like if you can’t even talk to me – one person – for five minutes, I don’t want to [meet]…I find that ridiculous” (004: 41, gay, HIV+). These findings, although not representative of all men in the study, were somewhat surprising given that a sexual encounter was the immediate and primary reason for the interaction. However, these perspectives give a somewhat “humanizing” viewpoint into the online sex seeking – that there is still some sense of decorum required or social courtesy required in the search for sex, even in its casual forms. These examples are further examples of how online interactions can be structured by what men “give” and “give off” in those interactions.

Some participants were concerned for their physical safety in meeting men from the Internet for sexual encounters and accordingly they sought to assess the relative threat of a potential partner through their conversations and through profiles. For instance, men talked variously of looking
for “red flags” or “warning signs” in men’s profiles or conversations that suggested the potential partner might be a danger to their physical person. Constructions of physical safety took on particular salience for men who were seeking sexual practices that presented a greater risk of physical safety, such as bondage and sado-masochism. To this end, a participant who was into such practices noted: “I usually explicitly discuss limits and how we would deal with things if I got uncomfortable with the situation” (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-).

However, the following instance is of note because of what it reveals of the situated nature of men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives. This quotation comes from a participant who had a bad experience with a partner met online while he was exploring his potential interest in bondage scenarios:

This was a guy I’d met online that red-flagged me…you know, I knew he was a little off, and I went anyway because I just really wanted something, right. I was depressed, and unhappy. And I just wanted to have sex with someone and he was available. I’ve certainly used sex in a lot of ways to try and make myself feel better or try and make myself feel worse. *The more sad I am, or the more desperate I feel or lonely I’ve been, those are when I am willing to hookup with a guy that gives you a red flag* [italics added]. (003: 26, gay, HIV-)

This situation is particularly telling, because it clearly shows how this participant’s broader social circumstances came to influence his online interactions. Here, the participant’s desperation for connection saw him overlook his instincts about the danger in the potential encounter because of a stronger desire for connection. Examples such as these clearly indicate the situated nature of men’s online interactions, and they may have implications for risk behaviour and management in the sexual encounter.

Finally, partner compatibility could also be influenced by the limits that men wanted to place on the encounter, to preempt the encounter from becoming anything more than casual. Two participants in particular talked about this:
Before I came out… I’d try and find guys that were more into spending an afternoon together, and cuddling, kissing, sort of getting to know each other a bit, and so I’d screen for those kinds of guys…. it was sort of a way to get intimacy with men and…. and then after I came out…. now I find when I hook up with guys online I’m actively seeking out someone who wants…. it’s like I can’t, I can’t do that…. I can’t spend an afternoon with someone and not want more from them. Because I could actually have more from someone…. so now I go online and I try and find someone that I’m…. think is really hot, but that it’s going to be very easy to not see again. (003: 26, gay, HIV-)

I’ve realized that I can’t hold a long discussion with them via message or when we meet in person. This will open feelings within me that I want to know that further than a sexual object, and ruin the sex. So I usually limit the amount of time that we chat, and only ask certain questions. (019: 28, gay, HIV+)

These examples again demonstrate the complexities of the online sexual search, and how the process of partner selection can be bound up with other issues in men’s lives. This is another example of structural factors which can come to play a role in choosing partners online, overlaid by issues of boundaries, intimacy, and sexual orientation.

Thus although finding sexual partners online can be somewhat more efficient than finding them offline, the men’s stories show that there is still a complex process for deciding which partners will be met and the process was not as straightforward as one might presume. Examples of the “e-presentation” of self and the construction of the potential partner clearly demonstrate the socially-situated nature of Internet use and how the situated nature of Internet use can influence the online interactions. Moreover, this section illustrated a new dimension of the “structuring contexts,” by demonstrating how the online world itself – as a subculture – can also offer structures in which interaction becomes situated. The discussion now turns to sexual safety, one of the prime interests of compatibility for the men in the study and likewise a key interest from an HIV prevention perspective.
6.2.3. Presenting and Constructing Sexual Safety

Sexual safety was a fundamental concern among the men in this study. Before considering how sexual safety worked into the process of finding sexual partners, this section overviews how men in the sample viewed safer sex and its practice.

6.2.3.1. Participants’ Views on Safer Sex

The majority of the men in the sample were committed overall to having safer sexual encounters, which most men defined as using a condom for anal intercourse with other men. Unprotected oral sex was not seen as a particularly high-risk activity, and in talking about this, men drew upon lay understandings of such risk: “For oral sex I have not used a condom, although I probably should, but I probably wouldn’t….because I think there is a lower risk of STD transmission with oral sex, and it’s more enjoyable without a condom” (010: 38, queer, HIV-).

A neo-liberal perspective on safer sex was apparent in the men’s discussions of safer sex, sometimes quite explicitly. Men often talked about safer sex as the proper, normal and expected course of action, any alternative to which was not seen as an option: “I don’t know why, but sometimes…I really actually prefer safer sex…I want to wear a condom, maybe it’s ingrained in me, but it feels good. It feels like the proper thing to do [italics added]” (004: 41, gay, HIV+).

Within some of these conversations there was a very direct appeal to a discourse of responsibility around safer sex, to protect oneself, to protect others, and even to protect society as a whole, as in the views of this participant:

I’m a father so you have to…I think one of our responsibilities is to make sure your kid succeeds in life and I don’t think it’s really fair if I decide to depart when he’s 15 years of age….And responsibility to society, I mean, like it’s not cheap being HIV-positive…it’s like if staying healthy is a good option for society…I try to stay healthy, and don’t try to cause an inordinate amount of problems. (006: 47, gay, HIV-)
At the same time, though, there was some sense of begrudging the need for safer sex as it constrained the expression of the men’s desired sexual interactions. In this sense, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases meant that many of the men’s desired sexual interactions were unattainable. For example, when asked about how he felt about the practice of safer sex, one participant remarked:

Not very good but it’s a part of life….If I have sex I need to have sex, I can’t just masturbate or something like that….I would like to be able to have sex without a condom and eat cum and all that stuff that I choose not to….the feeling I could get….which I never had in my life. (010: 38, queer, HIV-)

Along similar lines, a few of the participants noted that while they felt safer sex was the only option for casual sex, they had the desire to experience unprotected sex, but only in the context of a long-term relationship: “I kind of feel that it would be more fun if you didn’t have to use them [condoms], be more sort of natural….I mean, I never did it without it, so it’s really hard for me to say how it feels…maybe one day if I find a partner that, you know, I can totally trust, then maybe” (015: 44, bisexual, HIV-). In these ways men constructed unprotected sex as something desirable and more natural than protected sex, but also seen as something that is attainable under only “safe” situations, such as a monogamous relationship.

While there was a sense that the men subscribed to safer sex as an overarching strategy, there were varying levels of confusion, misunderstanding and concern about safer sex and its effectiveness. For instance, men remarked that while condoms could protect against HIV, there were other sexually transmitted infections that they could not prevent, although men thought differently about their importance (i.e., wanting to avoid all other infections altogether as opposed to less concern because they were treatable). But beyond this, in some cases the limits of safer sex were of great concern:

I guess in my mind I think there is always a risk of catching a disease, like even with a condom….even if there is a 90% chance I can prevent HIV infection, oral, kissing, etc., can lead to other STDs [sexually transmitted diseases]…well, not kissing but like exchange of fluids, etc. Like to me, what if a guy is lying when he
says he’s safe? He can use a condom when it comes to anal but what about the other sexual activities? Stuff like that is what bothers me, and that’s the sort of stuff that stops me from having sex with other men or meeting, etc. (017: 21, straight, HIV?)

This example illustrates the many complexities in engaging with safer sex information and the impacts it can have on one’s sexual choices. This quotation comes from a younger heterosexually-identified man who had very little experience with same-sex relations. In fact, although men in similar situations may know they should practice safer sex, some may not be clear on what safer sex actually means and what protections it actually affords. This underlines the fact that men who use the Internet for sexual purposes can have diverse HIV prevention needs, an issue returned to later in this thesis.

This discussion demonstrates the various ways in which men engage with and apply knowledges about safer sex in their sexual behaviour. Overall, men constructed safer sex as the normative and expected behaviour, despite misgivings about it that some of the participants may have had. These findings might be considered somewhat surprising in light of the debate which ensues in this area about whether or not the Internet facilitates riskier sex. As the literature review earlier showed, research has shown that MSM who meet sexual partners online tend to have higher rates of sexual risk behaviour. At the same time, as the literature review pointed out, there are no clear answers as to whether or not the Internet is directly implicated in sexual risk behaviour.

In actual fact, men in this study experienced both planned and unplanned unprotected sexual encounters. The qualitative approach allowed a more in-depth investigation of the contexts of those unprotected encounters. What is particularly interesting from a public health point of view are the cases of unprotected sex among men who, as this section has shown, are otherwise quite committed to practicing safer sex. An analysis of their unprotected sexual encounters is the focus of the next chapter. Before that, the next section details how men managed sexual safety in their presentation of self and their constructions of potential partners.

6.2.3.2. Sexual Safety through Impression Management

Finding men who were also seeking safer sexual encounters was a priority for most men in the study. Many of the participants talked about the ways in which they portrayed sexual safety
through their online identities to attract partners who were likewise interested in safer sexual encounters. Profiles were again a central method of conveying safer sex intentions. In fact, some websites made available an option on the profile to indicate one’s intentions for a safer sex encounter:17 “it’s online…you put online like, ‘safe sex only’…so I have that on my ad” (004: 41, gay, HIV+). Where sites did not offer this option explicitly, men would indicate their safer sex intentions through written descriptions in their profiles.

In this way, the Internet offered a unique setting that allowed men to clearly announce their safer sex intentions. This particular aspect of the Internet as a venue for seeking sex allowed the men to incorporate their interest in safer sex directly into their “e-presentation” of self, putting these intentions into play from the outset of the interaction in a way that would not be possible in offline settings.

However, it is important to note that presentations of sexual safety were not as simple or straightforward as they may appear. Take, for example, one man’s explanation on why he does not select the option of “always safer sex” in his online profile:

> It’s only safer sex, it’s not safe sex [italics added]…that kind of philosophical hair-splitting or semantics scare some people so I have lost sexual partners who think I am a whore or slut and go off, because I don’t say “always safe sex.” (006: 47, gay, HIV-)

This example exposes the complexities and personalized understandings that go into producing an online presence, and it complicates the assumption that intentions for safer sex – and assumptions based on them – are unambiguous. While a perspective such as this one might be rare, it does problematize the notion that safer sex portrayals online are simple and straightforward.

Beyond the conveyance of their safer sex intentions in their “passive” online profile, men also actively discussed their safer sex intentions with their potential sex partners in the online chat. For instance, one participant noted: “I’m quite specific in telling the individual, do you practice

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17 For instance, on the site guys4men.com, the options for safer sex are “rather not say,” “always,” “most of the time,” and “never.”
safe sex?...I say we’re going to have to practice safe sex or we might as well just forget it” (011: 61, gay, HIV+). This opportunity is likewise a great advantage for negotiating a safer sex encounter. It allows men to explicitly clarify their plans for safer sex and indeed it may be the case that the additional comfort of meeting partners online – as discussed in earlier chapters – can translate into greater comfort in broaching and discussing safer sex intentions with online partners.

In sum, men in the sample exploited the unique opportunities the Internet offered them for presenting selves that clearly articulated their safer sex intentions. The ability to do so is a great advantage for encouraging and supporting safer sex and, by extension, the prevention of HIV transmission. However, the quest for sexual safety did not stop there. The discussion now turns to the other side of the equation, with a focus on how the men interpreted the relative safety of their potential partners through the partners’ presentations of selves, in a similar way to how men interpreted potential “compatibility,” as above.

6.2.3.3. Constructing Sexual Safety

Given the men’s overarching interest in finding partners for safer sexual encounters, a deciding factor for many of the men in choosing a sexual partner was the potential partner’s portrayal of their safer sex intentions; in Goffman’s terms, the indications of “safety” that potential partners “gave” or “gave off.”

Once again the online profile emerged as an important tool for finding like-minded partners. Many men sought out indications in men’s profiles that they were interested in safer sex: “I like sites that say, ‘practice safer sex’ and you can check mark a box, like... ‘always’...and if they [potential partners] don’t say ‘always,’ then I don’t hook up with them” (003: 26, gay, HIV-). Similarly, another man, said “if the guy says anything of the sort of ‘he wants bb [bareback] or raw or to swallow,’ I don’t have sex period...” (010: 38, queer, HIV-). Here again what is “given” and “given off” by the potential partner is important to determining fit of sexual safety. Thus online selves, as expressed through profiles, provide a double duty: men could sort specifically for other men looking for safe encounters, while avoiding those who specify otherwise.
Beyond the information provided in a potential partner’s profile, the Internet setting allowed men to more actively engage their potential partners in a line of questioning to intuit their relative safety. In some of these cases these lines of questioning would be direct and straightforward: “I…only ask certain questions such as, what their [HIV] status is, what they’re into sexually, if they have been tested for an STI [sexually transmitted infection] in the last three months, and if they play safe or raw” (019: 28, gay, HIV+).

However, some men took a more subtle track, attempting to tease out information about the partner’s sex life which could then be used to judge their sexual safety. For example: “I will try [to] ask questions to sort of screen for people who may be at a lower risk of having STDs [sexually transmitted diseases], like, I would say, ‘how many guys have you fucked in the past x period of time?’” (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-) or “I actually ask tricky questions like, ‘would you like to try bb [barebacking]?’” (010: 38, queer, HIV-).

These processes are interesting because they are somewhat unique to the Internet setting. Again, the (relatively) disembodied nature of Internet communication means that these sensitive and potentially embarrassing topics can be discussed in a more candid manner. It is unlikely that these same sorts of questions would be posed in the typical offline venue, such as bars, parks or especially bathhouses, where verbal communication is largely shunned (Elwood, Greene, & Carter, 2003; Haubrich, Myers et al., 2004). Internet communication thus introduces a new level of possibilities in the “inquisition” for determining sexual safety.

In some cases men drew upon their beliefs about the nature of men who found sex partners online in constructing the safety of those partners. For example, one participant remarked: “I’m concerned that guys who have ads on m4sn [men4sexnow.com] or sites like that have a high number of sexual partners which is not good” (013: 30, bisexual, HIV-). Another participant, younger and heterosexually-identified, noted “When guys say they’re disease free or only safe sex…I believe a lot of people lie about their details….because they’re more interested in getting the hookup to happen instead of reducing their chances by mentioning the diseases they have” (017: 21, straight, HIV?). Such constructions could be founded on beliefs about gay men more generally, as for this heterosexually-identified participant: “In terms of sort of what diseases are out there. The probability of contracting it [HIV] from a gay male is, I would suspect, higher than a heterosexual female” (016: 46, straight, HIV-).
For these men, constructions of sexual safety were built on more than simply what other men say in their profiles. Instead, their constructions were built upon assumptions derived from discourse about MSM and sex – for instance, men with more previous partners as more “risky,” or gay men as more “risky” in general. Interestingly, all of these men were non-gay-identified and had not met many male sexual partners from the Internet. In this way, these beliefs about sexual safety may in effect act as a sexual safety strategy in and of themselves, insofar as men avoid same-sex relations. However, such beliefs may also act as a barrier towards developing a healthy sexuality, free of misplaced fear of disease.

In fact, in most of these cases of “inquisitions,” men attempted to assess the safety of their potential partners, but still intended to have protected sex with those partners. In this way, the questioning offered a “double layer” of safety – men wanted to engage in safer sex with men whom they felt would be safer in general. However, there were cases where such safety assessments could lead to unprotected sex, as discussed in the next chapter.

These latter stories are of particular importance to understanding the process of how men seek “safe” partners online. They are particularly interesting because they again provide good insight into the “structuring contexts” at play in the interactions. The lines of questioning used by these men, as well as the beliefs they bring to the online sexual search, clearly reflect socialized discourses of “who gets AIDS.”

Indeed, Lupton and colleagues (1995) talk about how participants in their study framed the “contaminating Other”: persons who are “‘suspicious,’ not to be trusted, and who may well put a partner at risk of HIV infection” (p. 102). Their respondents used notions of quality and quantity to assess the relative “safety” of sexual partners: “quality referring to whether the partner is an injecting drug user, bisexual man, or someone who has paid for sex, and quantity relating to how many partners they or their partners may have had” (p. 99; see also Maticka-Tyndale, 1992; Warwick, Aggleton, & Homans, 1988). A similar process is at work here as the participants in this study attempted to gauge the safety of their potential partners. But again here the Internet offers a unique opportunity for taking this “inquisition” further since the men in this sample could actively engage their potential partners in dialogues which might not happen in other, more traditional, sex seeking venues, such as bars, bathhouses or parks.
A key issue of course is how men act on or use the information gleaned from their conversations and/or “inquisitions” with respect to their safer sex behaviour. With a few exceptions, as previously noted, most participants ultimately had safer sex with the sexual partners they had met online. However, the next chapter discusses cases where these “inquisitions” could have risky consequences.

6.3. Discussion

The findings presented in this chapter relate directly to the second and third objectives of this study, to examine intersections of men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes, their social lives, and their perception and management of sexual risk.

The findings in this chapter contribute to a relatively small literature which has considered aspects of online dating, where studies have also used a symbolic interactionist and/or dramaturgical perspective for investigating means of presenting one’s self online (e.g., Robinson, 2007; Ross, 2007; Fernback, 2007). The findings also contribute to a correspondingly modest cadre of studies that have expressly considered how online sex seekers present their selves, interpret potential partners, and filter their partners accordingly (e.g., Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Davis et al., 2006b; Hardey, 2002). The findings from this study are quite significant in extending this body of research because this is the first study to (1) consider how processes of finding sexual partners online are socially-situated and (2) to inquire about the implications of this socially-situated nature for sexual risk management.

To this end, this chapter expanded the concept of “structuring contexts.” It has shown how men’s online interactions could be influenced by the numerous structures within which they took place, including men’s previous interactions, discourses that circulate in the offline gay community, as well as norms of the online subculture which provided guidelines for appropriate behaviour in the online sexual search. These findings are important because they help unpack the online sex-seeking experience, by showing how it is a much more complex and layered process than simply “going online to find sex.”

The concept of “structuring contexts” highlights a number of interesting issues in the “e-presentation” of self. First, this perspective highlights some shortcomings in earlier research on Internet communication. As discussed previously, early research on the communication
potential of the Internet suggested that it was a liberating space, where participants could interact in a disembodied arena, free of physical presence and the “baggage” which that presence might entail. For example, Turkle (1995) likened the disembodied nature of the Internet to a “virtual laboratory,” where one can experiment with different versions of their “self” (see also McKenna & Bargh, 2000). However, more recent research has shown this perspective to be an outdated one (see, e.g., Ellison et al., 2006; Jones, 2005; Hardey, 2004; Robinson, 2007), and the findings from this study concur, on two counts: (1) the challenges introduced by offline meetings and (2) advances in technology.

Indeed, where the ultimate goal of Internet communication is meeting in person, the physical, embodied self reasserts its primary importance. Perhaps no more so is this true than in the case of dating, and especially online sex seeking, where aesthetics take primary priority. Jones (2005), for example, in his work on gay men and online sex seeking, found that the “picture” was central to the sex seeking interaction and that, counter to other work on the disembodied nature of Internet communication,

…participants’ bodies are very much present. In fact, they are, more often than not, the main topic of conversation…first through the use of textual descriptions, then through digital images, then through voice communication, and finally, if all goes well, through face-to-face interaction and physical contact. (p. 74)

Relatedly, as technology advances, there is a greater expectation that online communicators reveal more of their “true” selves. Indeed, most of the men in this study (and certainly in other studies in online dating) would not converse with anyone who did not have a picture available; and, of course, decisions of whom to speak with were dictated by the man’s attraction to the picture of the potential partner.

The corollary of this situation is that physical features which might be seen as undesirable in the offline world (e.g., being overweight, disabled, or other “stigmatized” conditions) come to play a role in the online world as well. Thus the Internet, when used for purposes such as sexual seeking, cannot be considered a harbinger of liberation, because the contexts in which the use occurs continues to exert an influence on the online interactions and indeed begin to shape the online culture itself. In short, norms and discourses that exist in the offline world can become
mapped onto the online world and influence the interactions that take place there. As noted in the literature review, the literature on online dating among heterosexuals similarly found that the “traditions” of dating offline can be reproduced in the online world: “The available literature and our own research indicate that online dating trends are both shaped by and situated within broader socio-cultural trends… in so-called advanced Western societies” (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008, p. 163). Further, Light et al. (2008) argue that the technical design of websites themselves – for example, in the options available for presenting one’s self through a profile – can reproduce and reinforce traditional stereotypes.

It is this exact sort of “mapping” of the offline world to the online one that is central to the idea of “structuring contexts.” Examples raised in this chapter showed how “offline” factors such as discourses of age and race in the gay community are reproduced in the online world, and structure how men choose to present themselves and interact with others in cyberspace. This chapter also demonstrated a socialization function of the online sex-seeking world, where men’s previous online interactions provided guidelines to help them present their “selves” to attract a successful and satisfactory offline meeting. Together, these findings demonstrate how performances must still be “legitimized” for a particular online audience, a paradox for the so-called liberating environment of the Internet.

To this end, Robinson (2007) notes the “cyberself is the emergent product of social interaction in which the self masters the ability to be both the subject and objective of interaction” (p. 104). This analysis speaks to the role of socialization in the “e-presentation” of self. It is through men’s offline and online experiences that they learn how to present legitimated performances of selves to attract the partners they desire. It is also through socialization that they learn to interpret and construct their potential partners based on how those potential partners present their own “fronts” in cyberspace. This point again speaks to the importance and influence of social context in deciding one’s “performance,” as this context can, in effect, dictate certain aspects of that performance. It also speaks to the centrality of symbolic interactionism and “taking the role of the other” in fashioning the “e-presentation” of self.

A key question is how these factors trickle down to the actual sexual encounter and their potential impact on men’s agency in sexual negotiation. The importance of these pre-meeting interactions cannot be understated because they may “set the stage” for subsequent interaction.
To this end, Jones (2005) makes the important observation that “sexual risk behavior is not just a matter of the actions that take place during the sexual act, but also of the relationships of power created by the patterns of negotiation that develop in the lead-up to physical contact” (p. 89). This perspective underlines the need to consider how situations of unprotected sex are situated in numerous layers of context and interaction, the focus of the next chapter.

However, all that being said, the Internet can still play an important role in helping men explore issues of their sexuality. Particularly relevant to this discussion are men who use the Internet to resolve tensions around their budding same-sex interests. Research has considered the ways in which the Internet provides a space for “trying out” new identities with little recourse for one’s offline world (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; McKenna et al., 2001; Phillips, 2002; Yurchisin et al., 2005). The fact that the Internet makes possible the emergence of new and/or multiple selves raises interesting points about the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM, which can be illustrated by drawing on Goffman’s (1959) concepts of “front” and “back” regions, and the relationship between men’s online and offline “fronts.”

Perhaps the case of non-gay-identified men illustrates this idea best. While offline, non-gay-identified MSM would most likely not present a “front” that demonstrated sexual interest in other men. Such an interest would more likely be relegated to a “back” region, hidden from the audience. However, the Internet provides a safe and anonymous setting for these men to explore these “backstage” interests, where “the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted” (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). Thus men’s offline “back” region interests can, through the Internet, become “front” stage performances. A similar argument could be made even for men who do identify as gay, but have specific sexual interests they may wish to keep hidden; in this case, the “self” which searches for these sexual encounters may indeed be a backstage self.

This finding emphasizes again the capacity the Internet provides in exploring new dimensions of one’s self, especially insofar as the Internet provides specialized settings to facilitate this exploration in an environment which, as earlier, provides a measure of “safety of reputation.”

Ross (2007) found similarly in his work on taxi drivers in training in London, England. He argued that an online forum for these taxi drivers functioned as a unique “backstage” region for them to communicate, in opposition to the formal presentations of self they have to make for their adjudicators in the process of becoming a taxi driver. Lin (2006) found an analogous
situation among young men in Taiwan, who used the Internet to create and perform “sissy” selves, a practice culturally looked down upon; however, at the same time, these men would also use different, more masculine online identities when looking for sexual hookups.

The dramaturgical frame used here thus underlines the importance of interaction and structure in processes of presentation of self, and demonstrates some of the implications the virtual environment presents for performances. However, from the outset, this study was designed to use sociological theory to investigate the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM to ask what insights such an analysis could hold for understanding sexual risk behaviour. The analysis presented here offers some important findings into the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet in sexual risk behaviour.

On the advantage side, seeking sexual partners online has the express benefit of a platform where attention can be placed directly on safer sex, as others have similarly noted (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Davis et al., 2006b). Davis et al. (2006b), for instance, also discussed how men present online selves and understand the selves of others. They found that MSM in their study used the Internet to filter potential sex partners based on their safer sex intentions, and in some cases they could “pre-empt” safer sex negotiation through this matching process. Indeed men in this present study likewise used their profiles to broadcast and establish their safer sex intentions from the outset. This ability could help pre-empt situations where men find themselves in a sexual encounter without the agency to negotiate safer sex. It also meant (in theory) that men could “safer sex sort” by attracting and/or contacting only like-minded partners seeking safer sex sexual encounters. The online profile again emerged as a central tool for promoting safer sex in Internet-arranged sexual encounters. It would be difficult in the offline world to so obviously broadcast one’s safer sex intentions. Nonetheless, these processes were not infallible, a point discussed further in the next chapter.

Further, computer-mediated communication may help facilitate explicit safer sex negotiations. The literature on computer-mediated communication emphasizes the disinhibitory nature of online communication, which seems to encourage online communicators to act in ways that they might not do so offline (Joinson, 2001; Joinson, 1998). As discussed earlier, many men in the study noted that they preferred looking for partners online because they felt it made them more social, that they were more comfortable with opening up conversation and dialoguing with
potential sex partners. It is reasonable to assume that this comfort would extend to the online conversations, where men might be more comfortable in broaching the topic of safer sex. Recent evidence suggests this is true: Carballo-Diéguez et al. (2006) found that MSM in their study were more likely to discuss sexual activities and negotiate safer sex when meeting partners online rather than in person. Horvath et al. (2008) found that men’s use of the Internet increased the likelihood of pre-meeting sexual negotiation, especially among MSM who were HIV-negative or of unknown status. Finally, Rietmeijer et al. (2007) found MSM who sought sex online were four times more likely to discuss their serostatus with potential partners than were MSM who met partners in bathhouses.

At the same time, though, these benefits have their downsides. First, there is the spectre of the proverbial issue of “best laid plans.” Men’s profile declarations of safer sex and/or pre-meeting discussions on the topic were not infallible: a number of the men in the study talked about having been prepared for safer sex – either through pre-meeting discussions with their potential partners or by simply having condoms with them – but nonetheless ended up having unprotected sex for a number of reasons, as discussed in the next chapter. In such cases, processes such as “pre-empting” and “matching” fail to deliver, which speaks to the importance of understanding the Internet-arranged sexual encounter from a social risk perspective, and considering the multiple influences that safer sex behaviour in the actual encounter. Further, some men expressed ambiguities about how they presented “safer sex” in their profiles, aligning with the work of Adam et al. (2008) who allude to the “complex signalling process” that can be involved in presenting selves and serostatus online (p. 766; see also Davis et al., 2006b). In short, the safer sex “protections” afforded by the Internet may not be enough to consistently effect safer sex in all cases, and this is an important issue for HIV prevention to address.

The length and depth of pre-meeting conversations may also have a downside. Walther (1996), in his work on computer-mediated communication, talked about “hyperpersonal communication,” where in the limited-cue environment of the Internet, communicators may project idealized qualities onto those with whom they are communicating. In short, chatters may become “too close too quickly.” This may be especially true given the disinhibited nature of online communication, where chatters may inquire into areas not easily discussed in the offline world. This raises the possibility of developing a sense of trust that is premature and/or unfounded, where online sex seekers may find themselves in a situation of trusting someone they
have met online more than they should, especially when it comes to issues of safer sex. For instance, online daters in Couch and Liamputtong’s (2007, 2008) work felt confident in their abilities to assess the relative “safety” of their partners based on perceived levels of trust and “gut instinct” (see also Henderson & Gilding, 2004). This situation is a potentially risky one and there was some suggestion of a similar process among men in this study, a point returned to in the next chapter.

This chapter has demonstrated some of the unique tools that the Internet offers men seeking sexual encounters with other men through the Internet. In contrast to other literature, it considered some specific ways in which these unique tools offer positive and negative implications for “risk” in sexual behaviour, and illustrated how the sex-seeking process is socially-situated.

As a final point, it should be noted that men can and do engage in similar types of impression management in the offline world. There are plenty of offline settings that can legitimate performances to find specific sexual encounters: for example, men interested in quick, anonymous sex can visit bathhouses and men interested in bondage can visit “leather bars.” But these situations presuppose men who are willing and able to participate in a “gay scene.” However, as revealed by the earlier discussion, such participation is not always possible. For those men who were alienated from a gay community – for whatever reason – the Internet provided a venue to explore their same-sex sexuality in safe, flexible ways and to expand their sexual experience in a less threatening arena. Therefore, it is important that literature on the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM account for the varied experiences of these MSM, a focus which has been somewhat lacking. Further, it is important to recognize how these unique opportunities afforded by the Internet may influence men’s safer sex behaviour, and their ability to successfully negotiate it.

The next chapter continues down a similar line of analysis, by considering how the Internet-arranged sexual encounter and sexual behaviour in that encounter can likewise by influenced by the structuring contexts of men’s Internet use.
Chapter 7
Context, Cyberspace and Sexual Risk

7.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on men’s experiences with sexual risk and their management of it. Like the previous chapter, this chapter addresses the third objective of the study, by focusing on the situated nature of the offline sexual encounters as well as what this focus can illuminate for innovative HIV prevention. This chapter considers situations of both planned and unplanned unprotected sex and identifies themes in the participants’ accounts of unprotected sex.

7.2. The Sexual Encounter

All but one of the men in the study had met a male partner online for an offline sexual encounter. As earlier, men in the sample overall were committed to safer sex. Nonetheless, men in the study did experience either unprotected sex and/or situations where the circumstances may have encouraged sexual risk behaviour. The cases of unprotected sex among men in the sample can be roughly divided into two groups. In the first group were cases where the unprotected sex was voluntary and planned. In the second group were cases where men engaged in unprotected sex in unplanned (and sometimes involuntary) situations, or in situations where unprotected sex was a distinct possibility given the context of the encounter. Both sets are of particular interest to HIV prevention. In the former instance, an understanding of why men engage in voluntary unprotected sex can illuminate effective methods of risk reduction that respond to men’s actual own needs. The latter case is arguably even more important, because they represent cases where men otherwise committed to protected sex find themselves in “risky” situations. The purpose of this section is to examine more thoroughly the circumstances of these “risky” situations and ask how the Internet may play a role in shaping them.

Following the social risk perspective guiding this study, this discussion sheds light on the socially-situated nature of sexual risk behaviour in both planned and unplanned experiences of unprotected sex. It considers how men managed risk within their sexual interactions and the contexts in which those interactions were situated.
7.3. “Risk” and “Risky” Sexual Encounters

This section explores the themes that arose in the participants’ accounts of their experiences with unprotected sex. For the purposes of this chapter, unprotected sex is defined as anal intercourse between two men without a condom. Again, unprotected oral sex is not considered here because it was not of particular concern to the men in the study, and it is generally considered a lower-risk activity for HIV transmission.18

A differentiation is made in this chapter between “risk” and “risky” situations. “Risk” situations are defined as men’s sexual encounters where unprotected sex actually occurred. In contrast, “risky” situations refer to men’s sexual encounters where unprotected sex either occurred, but was not planned, or was a potential outcome of the encounter. The encounters discussed here refer to men’s experiences with unprotected sex and “risky” situations with partners met both online and offline. However, there is a specific focus in this section on what unique or specific role the Internet may play in configuring such situations and these particular issues are highlighted throughout. The overall focus is on a consideration of the contextual influences on sexual risk behaviour across all cases.

7.3.1. “Risk” Encounters

As above, “risk” encounters refer to situations where unprotected sex occurred in a situation where HIV transmission was a possibility. This section explores the strategies and rationalizations men in the sample used to account for their experiences in sexual encounters where unprotected sex was planned and deliberate. Two broad themes emerged here: first, utilizing risk reduction strategies in unprotected sex, and second, safer sex resistance.

7.3.1.1. Risk Reduction

Men in the sample who had planned unprotected sex used numerous risk reduction strategies to minimize the potential risks associated with that unprotected sex. These strategies were used in

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18 For instance, information produced for the public from the Terrence Higgins Trust (2009) states that while it is possible to contract HIV through oral sex, “the risk is lower than some other sexual activities.” A recent systematic review was unable to definitively assess the risk of HIV transmission through oral sex (Baggaley, White, & Boily, 2008). In the absence of larger studies to better answer this question, the authors suggest that “indeed the contribution of OI [orogenital intercourse] to HIV incidence remains low” (Baggaley et al., 2008, p. 1263).
sexual encounters with men met both online and offline (where applicable), but a key focus is on the particular implications of meeting partners online with respect to the implementation of these risk reduction strategies.

7.3.1.1.1. Serosorting

Serosorting is the practice of unprotected sex among men of the same HIV status, where new HIV transmission is not possible. Four of the six HIV-positive men in the sample reported that they had engaged in unprotected sex with other HIV-positive men. From an HIV transmission perspective, this nature of unprotected sex is not a particular public health priority, given that the men are already HIV-positive and they are engaging in unprotected sex with other HIV-positive men. However, from a personal health perspective, reinfection with a new HIV strain is a possibility (Smith, Richman, & Little, 2005). Most of the men were cognizant of this threat and used risk reduction strategies such as withdrawal to reduce the chances of reinfection.

All of the HIV-positive participants were clear on one point: they did not have unprotected sex with men who were HIV-negative or of an unknown HIV status. To this end these men exhibited an altruistic perspective, to protect their HIV-negative partners from potential HIV transmission.

Some of the HIV-negative men in the sample also mentioned serosorting in their experiences with unprotected sex. In these cases, men used intuition based on discourses of “safety” to justify the safety of unprotected sex with their sexual partners. For instance, two men said they engaged in unprotected sex with men who were having their first same-sex experience: “it was his first time with anal sex so the chances of him having an STD [sexually transmitted disease] were a lot lower” (001: 32, bisexual, HIV-). As explored in the previous chapter, intuiting the relative safety of a potential sexual partner is a common phenomenon (Adam et al., 2005; Lupton et al., 1995). However, unlike in the previous chapter, men used these intuitions to justify unprotected sex, rather than to intuit the safety of a potential partner (where unprotected sex may not have occurred).

In other cases, some men talked explicitly about basing their decisions about unprotected sex with potential partners on their online interactions with them, as mentioned in the previous chapter. For instance, one of the participants noted the following:
It depends on the guy, sometimes I won’t have anal sex and sometimes I won’t have oral sex because I find that there’s just something that tells me, I’m always very good at reading people when it comes to sexuality, *I’m always very good at finding if they have any STDs or HIV or whatnot*, don’t ask me how I do it, but I just do it….I probe, just a sense…*I can actually look at a person online and, just a picture*…and I can actually say, OK, they’re lying or whatnot [italics added]. (018: 23, unidentified, HIV-)

Another man noted that while he prefers unprotected sex in the context of a long-term relationship, he added, “if the moment strikes and no condom is present…*I guess I take him at his word* that he’s told me he’s neg[ative] and not suffering from some debilitating illness that is transmitted through intercourse [italics added]” (020: 22, bisexual, HIV-). Another participant noted that he would skip some of his typical questions when negotiating a sexual meeting with a partner online if he got a “good vibe” from them (021: 32, gay, HIV-). In such cases, men’s decisions about sexual risk behaviour were based in part on their online interactions with potential partners, again demonstrating how risk can be mediated through interaction.

### 7.3.1.1.2. Strategic Positioning

Another method of risk reduction was strategic positioning, premised on the idea that risk of HIV transmission is higher for the receptive partner in unprotected anal sex than it is for the insertive partner (Van de Ven et al., 2002). Two participants, both non-gay-identified and who met their partners online, mentioned the use of strategic positioning in their sexual practice. For instance, one of the men said, “even though the risk is high with both topping and bottoming, the risk is the highest being the bottom” (001: 32, bisexual, HIV-).

Evidence suggests that while unprotected receptive anal intercourse carries the highest risk for HIV, unprotected insertive anal intercourse nonetheless still carries a risk (Vittinghoff et al., 1999). Therefore, strategic positioning still presents a real opportunity for HIV transmission (Jin et al., 2007).
7.3.1.1.3. Withdrawal

A less common method of risk reduction among the men in the sample was withdrawal (forbidding men to ejaculate inside of them during unprotected sex). This technique was practiced by a minority of both HIV-negative and HIV-positive men in the sample. For the negative men, this was a strategy for lowering the chances of HIV transmission; for the positive men, it was a strategy for lowering the chances of acquiring a new strain of HIV.

7.3.1.1.4. Relationships

Other cases of intentional unprotected sex among some of the HIV-negative men in the sample occurred with partners in the context of long-term relationships. This is a relatively common situation, and does not pose a particularly high threat for HIV transmission, provided the partners are both HIV-negative and the relationship remains monogamous or there is an agreement of negotiated safety, where men in committed, but open, relationships will have unprotected sex with each other, with the agreement that any sex outside of the relationship will be protected (Kippax et al., 1997).

7.3.1.2. Resisting Safer Sex

There was a sense from a minority of men in the sample of a resistance to the traditional directives to practice safer sex. This rejection of safer sex practice was related to two issues: (1) the pleasure of condomless sex, and (2) extraordinary life events.

7.3.1.2.1. Pleasure of Condomless Sex

A small minority of men in the study felt that the increased pleasure of unprotected sex was tantamount to following public health doctrine. Some of the HIV-positive men welcomed the pleasure of condom-less sex without worry of infection that their serostatus allowed: “it felt good, it was different…I felt like I did not need to worry about anything because we were both infected” (019: 28, gay, HIV+). Only one HIV-negative participant, who found the vast majority of his partners online, reported that he would engage in unprotected sex with his casual partners if there was a mutual agreement not to use condoms. For him, this was a “spur of the moment decision” which he felt “is risky but I enjoy the sensations more than with a condom” (021: 31, gay, HIV-). While shown earlier that most of the men in the sample adopted a neo-liberal view of sexual safety, a small number of men found that the very fact that unprotected sex was
“wrong” made it appealing: “I think it’s just the fact that it’s frowned upon by so many that makes the thought of it a little exciting” (020: 22, bisexual, HIV-).

Again here HIV risk becomes relative to enjoying sex more, regardless of the potential for HIV transmission. This perspective highlights men’s relativity of risk: balancing the desire to have unprotected sex that offered a “better” sexual experience, versus the threat of a HIV infection or reinfection with a new strain of HIV. Risk reduction strategies allowed these men to compromise between these two extremes.

7.3.1.2.2. Extraordinary Life Events

Two of the participants talked about having had a series of risk encounters that they related back to particularly stressful events in their life. One participant noted his first experiences of voluntary unprotected sex occurred during a “suicidal phase” (004: 41, gay, HIV+) and another chalked his few experiences up to a “personal depressed state” (006: 47, gay, HIV-). From a social risk perspective, it is important to unpack the notion of a “suicidal phase” or “depressed state.” For example, the participant in the “depressed state” clearly identified the causes of his depression: (1) moving to a new city; (2) alienation from his family due to homophobia; and (3) difficulties at the workplace. Exposing the circumstances and/or contexts which comprise such a depressed state provides insight into the broader contextual factors that become implicated in situations of unprotected sex. This broader perspective helps situate risk behaviour within men’s social lives and experiences.

7.3.2. “Risky” Encounters

This section focuses on “risky” sexual encounters, defined as situations where (1) sexual risk behavior occurred but it was not planned and/or (2) situations where sexual risk was a possibility given the context of the sexual encounter. These experiences are important to understanding risk behaviour from a social perspective because they illuminate the interactional and contextual factors involved in situations of unplanned unprotected sex. Accordingly, this section helps further illuminate the “structuring contexts” at work in men’s experiences of unplanned unprotected sex.

“Risky” situations related to three issues: (1) interactional ambiguity; (2) preserving a desired connection; and (3) ending an unwanted connection.
7.3.2.1. Interactional Ambiguity

At the core of social risk theory is the idea that sexual risk behaviour is often the result of “negotiated action” between sexual partners in a sexual interaction (Rhodes, 1997). Accordingly, the sexual situation is a complex interaction where men must negotiate their desires and intentions to have safer sex with their potential partners. In some cases, men may not always be able to do so successfully, as in these examples.

Take, for instance, the experience of an HIV-negative bisexual participant, who met all of his male partners online. He recounted a story of an online interaction where he had arranged a meeting with a sex partner, during which time he had asked the partner whether or not he had condoms. When he received a negative response, the participant brought condoms with him to the sexual encounter and “assumed he would use them since I had them” (001: 32, bisexual, HIV-). This assumption ultimately proved wrong: the partner unexpectedly penetrated him during foreplay, and he allowed the unprotected sex to continue, to the point of ejaculation inside of him – the highest risk possible for HIV transmission.

The participant accounted for this situation as being “caught up in the moment.” While he felt it was “very stupid and dumb” to have done so, he also noted “it felt good,” exposing again the common tension between the self-protection desire and the pleasure of unprotected sex. This participant had subsequent unprotected sex with this partner, but since with a level of risk reduction, where he does not allow the partner to ejaculate inside of him.

It is clear that in this case, the pre-meeting chat was not enough to ensure that protected sex happened in the ensuing offline encounter. Where this participant ostensibly assumed that he and his partner had constructed a “shared sexual script” of safer sex, in actuality they worked from two different scripts and the results were dangerous. Situations like these draw attention to the fact that the Internet protections of “ground rules” can still fail in the actual sexual encounter.

Another participant, a gay HIV-positive man in his forties, explained that he had a short phase of voluntary unprotected sex when he was first diagnosed HIV-positive, engaging in unprotected sex with other HIV-positive men. However, on one occasion, he unwittingly had unprotected sex with an HIV-negative partner:
I screwed a guy without a condom...he asked me afterwards [if the participant was HIV-positive]. *He had condoms right there*, right, but...I was kind of noticing...they might have condoms out, *but if you don't want to use them...they're [HIV-]*positive [italics added], so when this guy...asked me afterwards...like shouldn’t you have asked me half and hour ago, shouldn’t you have asked me before I like stuck it in?....Safe sex is not asking people after... (004: 41, gay, HIV+)

This is also an excellent example of where the sexual interaction and its setting play roles in facilitating unprotected sex: in this sexual interaction, one partner’s act of not requesting a condom be used was interpreted by the other partner as a signifier of HIV-status, demonstrating the role of failed assumptions in the sexual encounter (Adam, Husbands, Murray, & Maxwell, 2003), where “silence can be read as assent” (Adam et al., 2008, p. 768). While the availability of condoms suggested intentions for safer sex, the situational interaction in the encounter ultimately worked against those intentions and facilitated unprotected sex between the partners.

In both of these cases, condoms were present and available but they were ultimately not used. In the first case, there had even been some broaching of the topic with the potential partner during the online interaction, and yet the condoms still were not brought into play. In the actual sexual situation, assumptions and miscommunications played a central role in the occurrence of unprotected sex. Both situations highlight the role that ambiguity in the sexual interaction can impact sexual risk behavior, underlining again the importance of considering social interaction in cases of unprotected sex. These findings also underline the importance of helping support men in cases where plans for safer sex are disrupted, especially when online agreements for safer sex were already in place.

7.3.2.2. Preserving a Desired Connection

In a number of instances men talked about unprotected sex in sexual encounters that represented more than just a casual “hook-up” – instead, these sexual encounters were the realization of the participants’ long-awaited and/or difficult to achieve desires for connection. In these cases, unprotected sex was a functional tool to preserve the sexual encounter at present, and in some cases, to establish a longer term connection.
One participant, an HIV-negative gay man in his mid-twenties, talked about a situation where his partner penetrated him unexpectedly without a condom and he found it difficult to stop the potentially risky situation:

I was uncomfortable because I didn’t want to say anything, because I felt awkward about saying something... *because I wanted it. I had this fantasy* about him being this...42 year old really muscular Greek doctor guy. And I wanted him to be this...top guy and *I didn’t want...to have to tell him that* [to stop]....I told him...but not... *as quickly as I could have* [italics added]. (003: 26, gay, HIV-)

Some context to this story helps demonstrate how this potentially risky situation was socially-situated. First, this participant had spoken earlier in the interview about his feelings of loneliness and desperation that led him to seek companionship on the Internet. He also spoke about trading sex to spend time with a man, and overlooking his misgivings about a potential partner when desperate for a connection. He likewise talked about struggling with coming to terms with his sexual orientation, culminating in a desire to meet a partner who would “somehow make everything OK.” The importance of this context becomes apparent in this situation: when this “idealized” partner and sexual setting finally presented itself, and then subsequently went awry, the participant was caught in a difficult tension between stopping a risky situation on one hand, and preserving a desired connection on the other.

In another case, an HIV-negative gay man told a similar story related to his coming out experience:

There’s been a couple times I’ve bit back the bullet and just did it....Because when I was in the closet too, I mean... *what you have to go through just to get a chance to meet somebody* [italics added]. (009: 35, gay, HIV-)

In this quotation the participant is talking about going through with less-than-ideal sexual encounters against his better judgment. Although this participant was not specifically referring to an unprotected sexual encounter, the story is enlightening because it also demonstrates a
strong influence of social isolation, when he talks about going through with unwanted encounters simply because it is so difficult to find any type of connection.

This same participant told another story about having unprotected sex with a partner he met online under the following circumstances:

We were seeing each other for about a week and it connected really well….We kicked it off, we had a sweet week, then it flaked right off because of course we met online and when I wasn’t available he was right back online….It was trust, we trusted each other. We said we trusted each other [italics added]. Now I date wrapped in Glad [plastic wrap]. (009: 35, gay, HIV-)

A consideration of this participant’s background again offers a glimpse into the “structuring contexts” at work here. First, he was relatively new to the gay scene, having once been married to a woman and had only more recently started participating in the gay community. He spoke in other parts of his interview about the difficulties he had encountered in finding a partner, and especially one that could be considered “romantic,” as well as his generalized displeasure with his experiences in the gay community he had recently discovered.

That being said, his synopsis above demonstrates how quickly he was able to “trust” his partner, although they had only been together for a short while. Thus the contexts of this case of unprotected sex are numerous: (1) newness to the gay scene; (2) a desire to find a romantic partner; (3) the difficulties encountered in that search, both online and especially offline; and (4) the perceived “connection” or “trust” felt with the partner, enough so to engage in unprotected sex. Also interesting in his story is the reflexive “once bitten, twice shy” story built into it: this experience made him alter his safer sexual behaviours in the future. He also hints at a certain cynicism about finding connection on the Internet, as he comments about the likelihood for men to return online when something in the present relationship is not working for them.

Thus again it is clear how sexual safety cannot be considered from a simple and unfettered “rational choice” perspective. These examples strongly illustrate the importance of “structuring contexts” in men’s management of sexual risk. Social isolation, loneliness, desperation, struggling with one’s sexual orientation, and the desire for connection with a partner surrounded
these men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes, and these same contexts could subsequently structure the eventual sexual encounter. While these contexts could affect sexual interaction regardless of where a partner was met, the Internet emerges here as the link, as it provided the solution to the problem of social isolation and lack of connection, with the resulting influence in the sexual encounter. This is an example of how conditions that structure men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes can also disempower men in sexual encounters.

An HIV-negative gay man in his late forties found himself in a somewhat similar situation. He related a story of having had unprotected sex with an HIV-positive man. The HIV-positive partner had told him that although he had once tested positive, he had since stopped doing so:

He said he was one of those persons but I still had sex with him, I don’t know why…He was honest with me, maybe it was the honesty I was crazy for….I didn’t bottom, but I topped him without the condom, so that was really weird, but I really liked him. And I was hoping it would go onto something [italics added]….that’s the little small town boy moved to Toronto thinking, “I’ll give it all on the first date and we’ll love each other forever.” (006: 47, gay, HIV-)

In this example there is a very central focus on using unprotected sex as a means of nurturing a desired relationship, adding another dimension to the role of unprotected sex in embryonic relationships. This example again demonstrates how unprotected sex is situated within numerous layers: (1) a trust of the partner; (2) risk reduction (i.e., taking an insertive over receptive role to minimize risk); and (3) future intentions for the relationship (i.e., a long(er)-term relationship), related to the participant’s admitted naïveté in “small town mentality” versus “big city reality.”

Examples such as these demonstrate how the contexts of men’s lives can play a role in shaping their experience and management of sexual risk. This fact underlines the importance of considering men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives from a situated perspective. An overarching issue here is men’s agency and capacity to successfully negotiate safer sex. In these cases, men’s strong desires to find a connection with another man and/or difficulties in doing so could influence their perceived agency in the sexual encounter to protect themselves: the
potential risk of the sexual situation was relative to more pressing concerns of a preserving a connection that was difficult to achieve.

Such examples raise the issue of safer sex “trade offs” (Adam et al., 2005; Ames et al., 1995), as discussed earlier. These trade offs occur among men who perceive themselves to be at some sort of disadvantage in finding sexual partners, usually because they do not feel they meet the criteria for age, race, weight, attractiveness, and so on as defined by the gay community—criteria which can be quite narrow and specific, as noted in the literature review. It is argued that these men are less likely to negotiate for safer sex if their partners are not in agreement, because they do not want to jeopardize the sexual encounter which was so difficult to achieve in the first place. A similar situation is at work in these stories, where men experience difficulties in meeting sexual partners, especially ones whom they come to “idealize,” like the “Greek doctor guy.” In such cases, the sexual encounter represented the realization of a desired sexual encounter which was difficult to come by, thus these trade off issues began to play a role.

While unprotected sex may not have occurred in all of these examples, the men’s experiences are important because they highlight issues that other men in similar situations might face, thus they are significant to note because they represent “risky” contexts and situations where men may be more likely to experience sexual risk.

7.3.2.3. Ending an Unwanted Connection

In opposition to the previous theme where sex was used to preserve a connection, some men used it to hasten the end of an unwanted encounter. When meeting partners online, potential “fit” or chemistry between the partners is usually decided through electronic means, such as online profiles and pre-meeting chatting. This process is unlike meeting partners in person, where fit may be easier to assess. In person, if one does not like a potential partner’s looks, personality or any other factor, they are unlikely to pursue a sexual interaction with them. However, such judgments cannot be as easily made online.

Many of the participants talked about problems with misrepresentation (discussed in greater detail in the next chapter), and what to do when the partner met online did not meet expectations in person—a fact usually not discovered until one partner has arrived at another’s residence. While many participants were able to extricate themselves from these situations, others were
unsure of how to exit the encounter, and oftentimes the easiest and most expedient solution was to simply go through with the unwanted sexual interaction. These examples expose some of the contextual factors involved with sexual encounters.

Take, for instance, the experiences of these two participants, both gay-identified but 25 years apart in age:

I just think of the…Caucasian guy who showed up at the door that said he was…same stats as myself, and was at least 30 or 40 pounds heavier than me. He called himself moderately hairy and he was a big bear of a guy and…he figured he got to the door, he’d be fine….we did fool around a little, we played a little. He got an orgasm out of it, but it wasn’t very pleasant for me, I mean, we just went through the motions and stuff like that. It was late at night, he’d driven from downtown to where I lived in the west end, I wasn’t going to totally waste the time for him [italics added]. (002: 56, gay, HIV-)

I chatted with the guy, I liked his picture, I invited him over. We didn’t meet somewhere first. He got here, and didn’t look like his picture. He wasn’t particularly clean either. There was no sexual or intellectual attraction there at all, and I wasn’t into the sex. I didn’t know what to do, so I just did it anyway, and regretted it [italics added]. (021: 31, gay, HIV-)

Such examples represent two different issues. In the first case, there is a sense of “obligation” to go through with the sexual encounter so as to not appear rude and have wasted the partner’s time, a perspective couched in notions of social courtesy. The second case speaks more to an issue of assertiveness and the ability to extricate oneself from less than ideal sexual situations. Both examples speak to proceeding with unwanted sexual encounters, which may impact men’s agency in safer sex negotiation. Again, the social interaction emerges as an influencing factor in men’s agency in asserting their wishes in the sexual encounter.
Another participant’s experience speaks to the interactional role in occurrences of unprotected sex. In this case, the partner had difficulty getting an erection, and even more difficulty maintaining it with a condom: “…so finally we’d had it, we did it without a condom, which was bad judgment on my part, I know…it was kind of like, I just wanted to get out of there. And I kind of felt sorry for him because he could not get an erection [italics added]” (008: 34, gay, HIV-). Again, a number of factors played a role in the unprotected sex in this instance, including the desire to end the awkward situation as soon as possible, as well as pity for the partner and his plight. Risk behaviour, here again, was mediated in the sexual encounter by the nature of its immediate context. This case also demonstrates another example of the failure of safer sex intentions and plans.

In sum, this section has demonstrated the various circumstances surrounding situations of unprotected sex among men in the sample, as well as situations that had the potential for becoming risky. In each of these situations, men rationalized and negotiated risk in the sexual encounters, with reference to the contexts in which those sexual encounters were situated.

7.4. Discussion

This chapter relates directly to the third objective of this study, to examine intersections of men’s use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes, their social and sexual lives, and their management of sexual risk. This section highlights the specific implications of the findings with respect to the Internet in men’s sexual lives, as well as speak more generally to the importance of assuming a social risk perspective when examining the sexual risk behaviour of MSM.

In some cases of planned unprotected sex men talked about engaging risk reduction strategies, such as serosorting, strategic positioning and withdrawal (Van de Ven et al., 2004), as well as negotiated safety agreements (Kippax et al., 1997). Some men also spoke about deliberately eschewing protected sex because it was more exciting and pleasurable to have condomless sex, as found elsewhere (Adam, 2006a; Adam et al., 2000; Crossley, 2004, 2002; Gastaldo et al., in press; Rofes, 2002). In other cases, men engaged in unprotected sex as a response to particularly challenging life situations, a point also found in other studies of MSM and their sexual risk behaviour (e.g., Calzavara et al., 2009). In other cases, men talked about “risk” and “risky” situations as a result of ambiguities in the sexual interaction, a desire to foster or sustain a connection with another man, as well as a means ending an unwanted sexual encounter.
These findings are enlightening on two fronts, which are taken up in the balance of this section. First is a discussion of how the Internet specifically may be implicated in facilitating “risk” and “risky” situations. Second is a reflection on the importance of the social risk perspective on this analysis.

While some previous qualitative work has considered situations where men have deliberately sought unprotected sex through the Internet (e.g., Balán et al., 2009; Dowsett et al., 2008), none of the previous studies in this area have considered how unprotected sex develops in Internet-arranged sexual encounters more generally and among men not specifically seeking unprotected sex. In fact, none of this work, with the exception of Poon et al. (2005), included any discussion of unprotected sex occurring in sexual encounters arranged online. This study is therefore the first to consider unprotected sex (involuntary and otherwise) in the context of Internet-arranged encounters. This analysis suggests that a rough line can be drawn between (1) new issues that searching for sex on the Internet introduces to the potential for unprotected sex, and (2) how the Internet may exacerbate existing issues that are related to unprotected sex. These are dealt with in turn here.

On the first point, much has been made in previous work about the protections that the Internet can introduce to the sexual search, such as the ability to clearly portray one’s safer sexual intentions in a profile and the opportunity to negotiate safer sex before meeting or “pre-empt” the negotiation through finding partners who also indicate in their profiles they are seeking safer sex (Brown et al., 2005; Davis et al., 2006a, 2006b; Engler et al., 2005). While it may be the case that these protections do indeed bring about safer sexual encounters, the potential downsides of these strategies should be recognized.

For instance, findings presented in this chapter showed how in some circumstances these protections could break down in the actual sexual encounter, perhaps especially when there has been no explicit discussion online about safer sex practice. In some cases, men experienced unprotected sex in encounters where they had understood they would be having safer sex, by virtue of their pre-meeting interactions and/or safer sex intentions. These experiences were related to ambiguities in the ensuing sexual interactions, as well as broader factors which came to play into safer sex negotiation, as returned to shortly.
The findings also raise again the concern mentioned in the previous chapter about “hyperpersonal” communication and the potential for misplaced trust and assumptions. There was some suggestion among a few of the HIV-negative men in the sample that they would engage in unprotected sex with a partner met online where they felt that the partner was likewise HIV-negative, a decision made vis-à-vis their online interactions. Similar findings have been reported elsewhere. For instance, Kubicek et al. (2008) relate the story of Danny, a young MSM in their study who developed a close friendship with another man online and, when they finally met, had unprotected sex: “he explain[ed] that knowing him as a friend and trusting him for a period of time made him feel that not using a condom was still safe” (p. 232). Likewise, Couch and Liampouttong (2007) note that their participants, who met sex partners online, were “confident in their abilities to assess potential sexual partners to determine with whom and when to use or not use condoms…based on trust between the parties” (p. 290). Henderson and Gilding (2004) likewise showed how the hyperpersonal nature of online communication presented “opportunities for enhanced trust” (p. 498).

For serosorting among HIV-negative men to an effective risk reduction strategy, both men must be aware of their HIV-status and disclose that status to each other (Halkitis, Moeller, & Pollock, 2008; Jin et al., 2007). Given the high potential for misplaced assumptions, serosorting among HIV-negative men can be particularly concerning for HIV prevention:

the chance that serosorting among partners who mutually disclose as being HIV-negative [emphasis in original] will lead to a seroconcordant encounter is likely to be lower because lying about a seronegative status may be more common, whereas for some who perceive themselves to be HIV-negative, seroconversion may have occurred since the last HIV test. (Rietmeijer et al., 2007, p. 218)

To this end, Jin et al. (2007) found that among the MSM in their study who had seroconverted, approximately one in five men wrongly perceived that their partner was HIV-negative. Further, Berry et al. (2008), who specifically considered serosorting among MSM in San Francisco who use the Internet to find sexual partners, found that “the Internet was…significantly associated
with an increased likelihood of UAI [unprotected anal intercourse] with potentially serodiscordant partners among HIV-negative MSM” (p. 788).

This perspective draws attention to the important question of how trust is built through online conversations and how it figures into unprotected sex in casual encounters, and to what extent such online-generated trust can – in a word – be trusted. Men who meet partners online may put too much faith into the conversations they have with, and intuitions they get from, their potential partners. This situation may be exacerbated by the online setting and the nature of its communication, thus the importance of the pre-meeting chats – and more importantly, how men act on what they learn in those chats – should not be underestimated. While again not a great many of participants in this study explicitly talked about relying on their online interactions to make the decision to serosort, it is nonetheless a concern that should be recognized and dealt with in men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes. The notion of unfounded trust underscores again how sexual risk behaviour can be mediated by social interaction and the discourses that are brought to that interaction.

In sum, these are some unique ways in which the Internet may be directly implicated in experiences of unprotected sex among men who are otherwise committed to having safer sex encounters. These are important findings because they highlight the ways in which men who are not deliberately seeking higher-risk sex may end up in such situations because of unique aspects of meeting potential partners online. Following from this idea, the next discussion focuses on the ways the Internet may be related to existing issues associated with unprotected sex among MSM.

In a number of the cases, “risky” situations men found themselves in related to their agency and ability to negotiate safer sex. Taken more broadly, their agency in these situations should be understood with reference to the “structuring contexts” in which the unprotected sex is situated. Take, for instance, some of the experiences of sexual risk among the HIV-negative men that related back to preserving or nurturing a connection with another man, which for some men was a situation that was difficult to achieve. Subsequently, this desire came to influence risk management in the sexual encounter. In such a situation, the Internet played the role of a “contextual catalyst,” in that it facilitated the connection and the sexual encounter where the “structuring contexts” came to influence risk management. A desire for connection was the
overarching context of both the men’s Internet use and their sexual risk management in the sexual encounter, demonstrating the Internet’s catalytic role in potentially risky encounters.

This line of analysis underlines the importance of considering how the Internet is situated within men’s sexual lives. In this case, the “problem” of loneliness that the Internet solved for some men in the study also represented the “structural context” which came to bear on sexual risk management. Therefore, the case may well be that the other “problems” to which the Internet provides a solution, as discussed in chapter 5, can similarly provide the context for unprotected sex. The Internet emerges as the connection between the two, especially in the cases of men who use the Internet as their exclusive or preferred source of partners. Thus it is important to understand the context in which the Internet use occurs because that context may have implications for sexual risk behaviour in the subsequent sexual encounter. In these cases, the contexts of men’s Internet use were also contexts that could disempower men in negotiating safer sex in subsequent sexual encounters.

Along similar lines, examples raised in this chapter also showed how some men found themselves going through with unwanted sexual encounters because they were not sure how else to end it or they felt obligated to see it through to the end. This notion of “obligation” has been explored in other research. Ridge (2004), in his work on the justifications of young MSM for having unprotected sex, found that some men (who met their partners offline) felt they were “contracted” to go through with undesirable sexual situations (p. 267). Engler et al. (2005) and Poon et al. (2005) found a similar sense of obligation among the MSM who found sexual partners online in their studies. While these examples presented here did not necessarily end up in unprotected sex encounters, this notion of “obligation” raises an important issue in that if men do not feel they have the ability to end these encounters in any other way than going through with them, they may likewise not be able to successfully negotiate safer sex in them either, making them a concern from an HIV transmission perspective.

While this issue of “obligation” can happen in both offline and online settings (Engler et al., 2005), it is worth considering that possibility that the nature of Internet communication may increase the number of situations in which this occurs. Again, meeting men in an online environment is very different than an offline one, because in the online realm men interact with a cyber-representation of their potential partner, not the “real thing” as men would in a bar,
bathhouse, park or other offline setting. However, in cyberspace the potential for misrepresentation is greater, a point explored further in the next chapter, thus there may be more cases of unpleasant surprises in the actual offline meeting. To the extent that the Internet gives men such access to men—especially those without access elsewhere, such as non-gay-identified men—this is an important aspect to consider.

Thus the findings from this study have illustrated the Internet may influence sexual risk behaviour among MSM in two ways: (1) unique aspects of meeting sexual partners online and (2) the social contexts that surround men’s use of the Internet to meet sexual partners. These findings make an important contribution to the debate in this area identified in the literature review, on whether the Internet facilitates higher-risk sex among MSM. The reigning consensus on this debate seems to be that it is MSM who have higher-risk sex more generally who are also now using the Internet to find sex partners, thus accounting for the relationship between finding sex partners online and higher-risk sexual behaviour. However, the findings from this chapter offer a new angle on this situation. The findings demonstrated how the Internet may configure risky encounters by virtue of the unique attributes of finding sex partners online and/or the contexts of men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes, even among men who are otherwise committed to engaging in safer sex. Thus while it may be true that men who seek higher-risk sex may use the Internet to find sexual partners, it must also be recognized that certain aspects of finding sexual partners online may indeed be implicated in sexual risk behaviour which is not deliberately sought out.

This chapter explored the experiences that the men in the sample had with unprotected sex. As outlined in chapter 3, this study was guided by theories of social risk (Rhodes, 1997), where the focus of analysis shifts from the individual and risk behaviour to an understanding of how risk behaviour is socially-mediated. From this perspective, risk is understood as a process of social interaction, where risk perceptions and interactions are influenced by broader context and norms. Such an approach was important because it was able to provide insight into the broader contextual factors which are at play in men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes and their sexual risk behaviour, which can thereby be instructive for HIV prevention, as taken up in the final chapter.
As noted throughout the discussion on the study findings, the social risk perspective helped situate cases of “risk” and “risky” situations. For instance, “risk” situations were related back to issues such as discourses around the characteristics and/or qualities of “safe” or “unsafe” partners, as well as “folk knowledges” around methods of sexual risk reduction. These situations also highlighted how interactional elements, such as trust and the nature of the relationship between the sexual partners, could mediate concerns about sexual risk. The “risky” situations entailed similar notions of socially-situated risk. For instance, ambiguities in the sexual interaction were related to unprotected sex, even where it was assumed that these ambiguities had been dispensed with prior to meeting. Other “risky” situations showed how structural issues which acted to diminish men’s agency and ability to negotiate safer sex come to bear on sexual encounters arranged through the Internet, and in many cases, it was these same structural issues that brought men to the Internet to find sexual partners. In all cases, “risk” and “risky” situations had broader macro-, meso- and micro-level links, which the social risk approach in this study helped illuminate. This study represents the first explicit attempt to investigate men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes and their sexual risk behaviour with reference to factors in the men’s broader social and sexual lives that might impact that sexual risk behaviour.

While some of the issues related to sexual risk raised in this chapter are relevant to sexual encounters regardless of where the partner is met, the fact that men meet sexual partners online makes the Internet an intuitive and logical place to promote prevention materials that resonate with the ways men engage with and respond to sexual risk, as this study has identified. To this end, the findings from this study suggest some areas of focus for such HIV prevention, as taken up in the final chapter. Before that, the following penultimate chapter considers the existence of an online sex-seeking subculture and the ways in which men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives may impact their offline lives as well.
Chapter 8
Impacts and Progressions

8.1. Chapter Overview

This final substantive chapter discusses four additional aspects of men’s Internet use for sexual purposes: (1) experiences with an online sex seeking subculture; (2) men’s “best” and “worst” experiences with meeting sexual partners online; (3) the impacts of men’s use of the Internet in their “offline” social and sexual lives; and finally (4) the men’s own views on HIV prevention and how it can be improved.

The first section of this chapter explores the existence of an online subculture of sex seeking which can also act as a structuring agent in men’s online interactions. This discussion relates to the third objective of this study, by illustrating another layer of context in which sexual risk perception and management takes place.

The second section of this chapter discusses men’s perspectives on their “best” and “worst” experiences of seeking sexual partners online. This discussion related to the first objective of the study, as it gives further insight into how men use the Internet for sexual purposes and their experiences with doing so. This discussion also illustrates some of the “rules of engagement” that exist in the online subculture mentioned above.

The third part of this chapter considers the ways that the Internet can impact the men’s social and sexual lives, proposing that while offline contexts can impact online ones, so too can online experiences impact offline ones. This discussion relates to the second objective of this study, by illustrating another dimension of the intersections between men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes and the contexts in which that use occurs.

The final part of this chapter presents the participants’ views on HIV prevention materials they have encountered, and their perspectives on how future prevention initiatives might be improved. This discussion relates to the fourth objective of this study, to provide insight into HIV prevention which is responsive to men’s own experiences, including their own views on what they would find helpful in HIV prevention.
8.2. “There’s definitely a whole little culture to it”: An Online Sex Seeking Subculture

Other studies have considered how the Internet can play an important role in socializing men into gay communities (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Engler et al., 2005; Sanders, 2008). Sanders (2008), for instance, focused specifically on the ways in which MSM used the Internet to learn more about gay culture. However, these studies do not consider how men also need to learn how to participate in the online sex seeking world, and the role this socialization process may play in sexual risk behaviour. This section presents evidence of an online “sex seeking” subculture, based on findings from the participants’ accounts of their online experiences.

Subcultures tend to form to provide a place for like-minded individuals to network, especially individuals who are otherwise “outside” of conventional society, such as homosexuals (Gelder, 2005). Subcultures typically develop their own languages, practices and belief systems. While gay communities more generally can be considered “subcultures” (Ross et al., 1996), the men’s accounts of their experiences online both explicitly and implicitly spoke of the existence of an online subculture, one that is influenced by the offline gay community but also with unique new aspects. Indeed, the opening quote of this section, spoken by a gay man relatively new to the gay scene both online and offline, quite unambiguously underlines that there is a culture online that needs to be learned.

Throughout the previous chapters there have been references to an online sex-seeking subculture among MSM. For example, chapter 6 illustrated how men needed to put on a “legitimated” performance that was appropriate to its setting in order to attracted the desired sexual partner and/or sexual encounter. Chapter 5 as well talked about the ways in which some men in the sample learned about sex between men and gay culture through their online interactions. Both examples speak to the existence of an online sex seeking subculture.

The following quotation speaks quite eloquently about the existence of an online subculture as well as its impacts on those who participate in it:

There’s rules. It’s weird the little rules that they all have, I guess…you know, when you’re supposed to say “hi” first or “are you looking”…sometimes they include the rules in your bios, you
know, up to a certain age, you’re not supposed to approach a
certain age, unless you’re some muscle god who’s going to
terrorize that age, so little rules like that….They all know the
scene….I don’t know ways of saying things, like I had to figure
that out after a while, you know…no LTR [which means] no long-
term relationship or BB WS is “bareback” and “watersports” and
stuff like that, I just didn’t even know what it means….like I don’t
know those little rules and stuff like that. (009: 35, gay, HIV-)

This example sums up the many different “rules of engagement” of the online subculture that
men must learn to participate in it: what to say; when to say it; the influence of offline discourse,
in this case, around age; and learning the subcultural argot. In some cases, men new to gay
culture, like this participant, not only had to learn the online rules of engagement, but also learn
about what they actually meant in terms of the gay culture – for example, learning what
“barebacking” or “watersports”19 actually means.

As men gained more experience with this subculture, their online experiences also changed. For
example, men discussed how they learned about how different websites could produce different
results, and they altered their behaviour accordingly. For example,

I use gay.com probably more than anything else, simply because
it’s really easy to chat with people on that site…And in certain
sites, you know, stuff happens and stuff doesn’t happen and then
certain sites have different kinds of guys, like dudesnude[.com]
…has a lot of good looking guys, a lot of guys who are really fit,
right. (003: 26, gay, HIV-)

As this example illustrates, there is a learning process in discovering which sites to use and how
sites differ. Men also talked about how, through experience, they became better at asking the
“right” questions to help ensure that they would meet a partner that they would be compatible
with.

19 “Watersports” are sexual activities involving urine.
Along similar lines, men talked about how they learned to refine their partner choice as they gained more experience with finding sexual partners on the Internet:

I probably hooked up with guys then [when the participant was first online] that I wouldn’t hook up with now, just as I was trying it out….The guys are the same, but I’ll not hesitate to take a pass now when I wouldn’t then….I didn’t realize there was the number that there are out there, and that I had other options….Now I look for quality, not quantity. (005: 49, gay, HIV+)

In this way, men’s use of the Internet changed as they gained more experience with the online subculture and its expectations. Thus the Internet should not be considered a “static” venue for meeting sexual partners, but rather a dynamic one, the use of which can change as men gain more experience with it.

In a related way, men also talked how they came to learn the limits of what they might expect from their online partners. For instance, there was some sense among the men that they learned through their experiences to normalize occurrences of “failed connections” – in other words, they came to expect issues of misrepresentation and other undesirable behaviour. In fact, a particularly telling illustration of this occurred in one case before an online interview had started. During the preamble of the interview, the researcher asked the participant that should he did not wish to continue with the interview, he explicitly explain that to the researcher, and not just stop responding to questions. In response the participant said, “Sure, I’m not a guy like most on gay.com…lol [laugh out loud]…I do have some guidelines and ethics” (010: 38, queer, HIV-). In this way, there was some sense of cynicism among men in the sample about the nature of people online and what could realistically be expected from them.

A similar situation occurred with men’s expectations about the nature of relationships they could form online. Granted, some men explicitly talked about the stigma they felt was attached to finding relationship (as opposed to casual sex) partners online, thus constructing a discourse about what types of relationships were acceptable through the Internet (see also Sanders, 2008). However, some men had gone online in hopes of finding romantic partners, and ultimately found that this hope was unlikely to be realized in the online environment:
At the beginning, my objective was to discover guys that wanted dates, and no LTR [long-term relationship], but the longer it went and guys were messaging me for sex, I decided to forward my approach and met the first guy offline. It’s really difficult to meet guys online who wish to date or a long-term relationship. (019: 28, gay, HIV+)

This section has demonstrated the existence of what might be termed an online “sex seeking” subculture. Men’s online experiences demonstrate many of the traditional facets of a subculture: a collection of like-minded individuals with a system of normative behaviour guides, a distinctive language, and specific values and beliefs. Interestingly, the men’s stories show how these norms influence their online interactions but at the same time, these norms can largely reflect the norms of the “offline” gay community; for instance, the influence of discourse around “proper” behaviour for men of different ages.

The existence of such a subculture is important because it adds a new layer to how the Internet relates to the sexual lives of MSM, since it presents a different learning environment about gay culture and safer sex. Men had to learn the “rules of engagement” to participate in this subculture and at the same time, their experience of the subculture grew as they spent more time in it. The findings here speak to a generalized sex-seeking subculture, as represented by men who were using the Internet to explore their sexuality and seek sexual partners for typical sexual encounters. There was some evidence of men’s use of the Internet for finding partners for more specialized interests, such as bondage and exhibitionism. Certainly there are many sites online which can cater to these specialized interests. As Brown et al. (2005) note, there may be many different subcultures based on different interest groups on the Internet. It is therefore important that future research address how these online subcultures may impact sexual risk management and behaviour, especially the extent to which online interactions can play an educational role for men new to same-sex relations.

8.3. Perspectives on the Offline Encounter: Makings of The Bad (The Ugly) and the Good Experience

As the findings presented thus far suggest, there were varying degrees of “success” in, and satisfaction with, the offline encounters that men had arranged online. While many encounters
proceeded without a hitch, some failed while others were better than most. This section highlights some themes in the participants’ stories about what constituted a “bad” and “good” experience in finding sexual partners online. These themes are enlightening because they further expose the complexities of the Internet sex-seeking experience.

8.3.1. Unpleasant Surprises: The Bad Experiences

Most of the research in this field has demonstrated the problems men encounter with misrepresentation online and certainly this study was no exception. Almost all of the men equated their “bad” experiences with some sort of misrepresentation on the part of their partners: (1) physical; (2) sexual; and (3) misrepresentation of intentions.

The participants talked about physical misrepresentation as one of the major contributing factors to a bad experience. Physical misrepresentation occurred when their potential partners had presented an inaccurate picture of what they actually looked like. As might be expected, physical misrepresentation most often related to age, weight and general body structure:

He had basically minimized his outstandingly bad personal traits and physical shortcomings. Nothing to say – claimed to be a great talker. He claimed he had a few extra pounds, to me that didn’t mean he was somewhere in the range of 300 [pounds]. He told me he was 24, turned out to be 27 (I was 19 at the time). (020: 22, bisexual, HIV-)

These situations raise a question about honesty and accuracy in the performance of self online, as discussed earlier. Interestingly the participants in the study noted that while they strived to be accurate in their presentations of self, they felt that many others were inaccurate in their portrayals, as examples like the above attest.

But like all aspects of the Internet sex-seeking experience, differing dimensions of physical misrepresentation existed, which prompted different responses. One participant, for example, talked about having different responses to the situation based on the “deliberateness” of the misrepresentation:
Where you know it’s sad because their picture was in fact an accurate picture but maybe they looked better in the picture…so it wasn’t like “oh my God”…that for me is the most uncomfortable because it’s easy for me, if someone comes over and they totally misrepresented and say, “Fuck you, I don’t know who’s picture you sent but it wasn’t yours,” as opposed to, “Damn, I messaged you and now I’m over here and now I really feel like an arsehole,” you know, that is the worst thing about the online experience I think. That doesn’t happen in a bathhouse…you’re never in a bathhouse like, “Oh, wow, you looked so much better in the showers than you do in your room.” (004: 41, gay, HIV+)

This example makes clear the uniqueness of this sort of misrepresentation to finding sexual partners online. It also suggests a hierarchy of “forgiveness” in cases of misrepresentation.

Men also noted misrepresentation of the partner’s sexual intentions as a problem with online sex seeking. This problem occurred when the men encountered requests in the sexual encounter that had not been discussed previously, or which were in contradiction with the previous agreement:

I met a person over the Net and he had pictures and all that. I called him, he sounded pretty good over the phone, and then when I actually met him, things were not as…I mean, he was still a very nice guy, sexually he was into different things than I was, and he didn’t make me aware of it so…to me it was sort of a shock, total surprise for sure, I just didn’t like it so it pretty much ended very, very quickly….He was into more…totally wild sex and you know pretty much, playing…with your ass…sticking his hand all the way up to the elbow and I was…I’m not into it at all. (015: 44, bisexual, HIV-)

Another participant, who was into the sado-masochism scene, found a similar problem:

I met this very good looking guy with the right package. He was into the slave and master scene….We had a really long chat prior
to meeting. We began to play and I was really into it, really turned on, and amazed by the gentleness that he was using. Unfortunately in the master and slave scenes – you really have no control over what happens. The only person with total control is the master. He pitched my head up, while I was blindfolded and requested that I open my mouth….I gave one of the signals [to stop] and asked him to disclose what type of liquid he was feeding me. He did not respond, and started pouring this liquid that I had no clue what it was. It came to a point where I requested that we stop, and left. It turned out that the liquid was water, but I was not able nor willing to lose full control. (019: 28, gay, HIV+)

These examples are interesting because, in theory, all of the safeguards were in place: the potential partners seemed “on the level” and did not raise any warning flags, and the sexual boundaries had been set. And yet, in the actual sexual encounter, these boundaries were transgressed. These examples further illustrate how the pre-meeting chats that the online setting affords cannot guarantee a sexual encounter free of problems.

A final type of misrepresentation was misrepresentation of one’s intentions. In these cases, men became frustrated with other men online “leading them on” with no intentions of actually meeting offline. This form of misrepresentation is somewhat different from the other two, because it did not ever culminate in an actual physical meeting – hence the misrepresentation.

This type of misrepresentation took two forms. In one form, it meant encountering men who would chat, but not carry through with an actual meeting; for example, “People are sometimes just wasting time on there with no intention of hooking up….sometimes people also want to chat more than actually hookup – that is OK, but they should just say that and make it clear that…they aren’t looking for a hookup” (014: 48, gay, HIV+). In its other form, such misrepresentation meant going so far as arranging the meeting, and then being “stood up” by the partner: “There are people that play games…they act interested…and then not really go anywhere, you know? I had one guy who like gave me the wrong [apartment] buzz code, that was really weird” (008: 34, gay, HIV-).
Again, many of these situations are possible only through the Internet or, at the very least, are complicated by using it to meet sexual partners. These stories are interesting because they demonstrate the complications that can arise in seeking sex online, showing that it is not a simple and straightforward procedure as some of the previous research might suggest. It also speaks to the heightened attention that needs to be paid to agency and skill in men’s ability to extricate themselves from less than ideal situations, similar to the discussion on obligation above. They also give some insight into the norms of the online subculture as to what types of behaviour are and are not acceptable in the online setting.

8.3.2. More than Just Sex: The Good Experiences

On the flip side of the bad experiences, men in the study also talked about their good or their best experiences in meeting sexual partners online. Some obvious reasons were talked about here, including partners who were better looking than their online pictures and encounters where the sex was particularly enjoyable.

But beyond these explanations, a somewhat paradoxical theme emerged. For a number of the men in the study, the “good” or “best” experience encompassed factors that are more associated with intimate relationships, rather than immediate and casual sex, which is commonly assumed in the context of Internet sex seeking; indeed, there is some sense of stigma attached to seeking a longer-term relationship online (e.g., Sanders, 2008). Men identified their best experiences as situations where there was a genuine connection with the partner, mutual interests, repeated encounters, and the potential for a long-term relationship. Take for instance the following two examples:

> They were fun, serious, they like heavy guys like me, and I was totally into guys like them (I’m talking two separate times). We had over three hours of sex, they did whatever I asked them to do, they were cute as models both of them, with great conversation, both were shy guys and they seemed pretty grounded. (010: 38, queer, HIV-)

> I e-mailed him and we decided to meet at Buddies on Church Street [a bar in Toronto’s gay village]. I went down, he was there,
we had a very nice conversation, a drink, he asked me up to his apartment and we had sex and he asked…if we could get together again…and we’ve been seeing each other off and on. (011: 61, gay, HIV+)

Stories such as these are interesting because they demonstrate that meeting partners online can be about more than just “finding sex.” Again, they are also significant because they are in contradiction to the idea that sex is the primary and immediate focus of seeking sex online. Even in cases where quick, casual encounters were the participants’ prime reasons for being online, these types of stories emerged. Such findings suggest that even in the casual and anonymous nature of online sex seeking, there is among some men a longing for something “more” from the encounters.

Overall, the participants’ stories of their bad and good Internet experiences help illuminate some of the complexities involved in the online quest for sex and problematize the simplistic characterizations of Internet sex seeking. They also provide some insight into HIV prevention, as discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

8.4. Links Between Online and Offline Worlds

This section explores some of the central ways in which the men’s Internet use for sexual purposes came to impact their social and sexual lives in the offline world. Three themes emerged here: (1) developing sexuality; (2) isolating effects; and (3) addiction.

8.4.1. Developing Sexuality

Chapter 5 showed how some men, especially those men new to same-sex relations, used the Internet for sexual education and exploration. While that discussion focused on the “how” of men’s use, this discussion focuses on the impacts of the use of the Internet for sexual education and exploration. To this end, men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes could play a role in developing their understanding of their own sexuality and their views on sex. For example, one participant remarked on how the Internet has helped him explore new sexual tastes, as well as to work through some issues of family values and his sexual orientation:
The last year has been the year that I’ve really been online countless times….I think its due to me wanting to explore various levels of sex, such as leather, groups and so on. I also think I’ve grown to the point where I’m not afraid of sex and exploring the various levels of sex. This really stems down to the way I was brought up and the beliefs that my parents instilled in me. I still believe in those values, but I’ve matured and realized that I’m not a bad person if I explore…. [The Internet] opened my eyes and provided the opportunity to engage with other guys that have skills and experience in those practices. (019: 28, gay, HIV+)

In a similar way, men’s Internet experiences with same-sex relations helped challenge some of the beliefs they previously held about homosexuality in a voyage of discovery to realizing their own sexual interests. For example, participants talked about how their Internet experiences changed helped them come to terms with their sexuality:

I realized there was a greater community of gay people and they weren’t child molesters or pedophiles or, you know, circus freaks or something like that or people that wanted to be women or something like that. It [homosexuality] wasn’t as deviant as I was brought up to believe. So all that information was online, and the…guys I talked to, even though it was for sex, like we had these conversations…about whether gay is right or wrong or good or bad or whatever… (008: 34, gay, HIV-)

I went on a site called “Puberty 101” and it talked about…identifying yourself, like how do you know if you’re gay…I went to a lot of [online] forums…there’s a lot of guys who are curious, questioning, you know… (018: 23, unidentified, HIV-)

Said another participant, a bisexual man who used the Internet as his sole source of male sexual partners: “I have become a lot more liberal in my views on sex….Before I started having sex/hookups, I viewed sex as only for a serious relationship/marriage and that has since changed…. [the Internet] made sex a lot more accessible than if the Net didn’t exist” (001: 32,
bisexual, HIV-). A particularly interesting thread between these stories is the role that the Internet played in challenging some of the values and stereotypes that these men were brought up to accept.

The Internet also played a role in some of the men’s discovery and expansion of their interest in non-heterosexual sexual relations. For example, one of the participants with a new interest in transsexuals noted, “[the] Internet helped me to discover something that I didn’t know I liked and provided me with videos” (022: 20, bisexual, HIV?), and another, a straight-identified man who recently had his first experience with another man, facilitated through the Internet:

I’ve become more accepting to the fact that I can be prone to trying things out with guys….I guess realizing that I might be getting more and more into guys….I would like to believe I’m straight and would love to only be into women, but I don’t think I’m going to deny the fact that I love gay porn and feel very into have sexual activities with men. (017: 21, straight, HIV?)

These examples highlight how the Internet and men’s interactions online could become important factors in the development of their sexuality. These interactions helped challenge some of the beliefs that they had previously held and allowed them to come to realize new facts about their sexuality. Such developments demonstrate how the Internet can mean much more than merely a place to find sexual partners for men who are just coming to terms with their sexual interest in other men.

8.4.2. Isolating Effects

Much of the discussion in the preceding chapters focused on how the Internet helped facilitate connections with other men online. However, some men felt that in so doing, their Internet experiences have had the disadvantage of isolating them from offline social interactions.

For some of the gay-identified men, this isolation was seen to impede or inhibit their interest in establishing longer-term relationships: “Sometimes I think that if I didn’t have sex with men online, would I be forced to try and meet them more in my life. Would I go to bars more maybe? Would I…would have forced me to get a boyfriend?” (003: 26, gay, HIV-).
On the other hand, some non-gay-identified men felt that this isolation made it too easy to keep their interest in men a secret and not impel them to come out. For example, one participant said the Internet played an “inhibitory” role in his coming out process, because “I was less motivated to come out because I could find sex anonymously. If I couldn’t, I’d have relatively little choice but to readily identifiable as gay, you know, rainbow backpacks and lower back tats [tattoos] of butterflies and glitter” (020: 22, bisexual, HIV-).

Both cases suggest that the Internet may play a role in isolating men from more active involvement in gay communities.

8.4.3. “You do it once, you do it twice…then it’s a habit”: Perceptions of Addiction to Internet Sex Seeking

As the quotation above suggests, a few of the men in the study felt that they had become addicted to the Internet and the sexual encounters it facilitated. In these cases, the men’s Internet use had started interfering with their daily functioning:

It is a waste of time…very addictive and it has ruined precious days of my life…too much time spent…get very depressed…losing quality time with family and friends or developing other good relationships…sleeping time. (010: 38, queer, HIV-)

Accordingly, these men took steps to restrict their use of the Internet for these purposes. These steps were instituted under their own accord: “I’ve reduced my use…I used to be on gay.com for many hours a day, back in early 2000…I started using it less and less after 2003, and eventually I stopped using the gay.com chat last year” (007: 43, gay, HIV+).

Taken together, these issues illustrate the fact that there is no easy separation from offline and online worlds. While the role of the Internet in helping men develop their sexuality may be considered a positive, the sense of isolating effects and additions suggest somewhat of “maladaptive” progressions to the use of the Internet.

It is important to recognize the links between men’s offline and online interactions and experiences – while offline experiences can come to structure online ones, so too can online
experiences influence offline experiences. The Internet thus emerges as a very fluid tool in the sexual lives of MSM.

8.5. Participants’ Views on HIV Prevention

This final section discusses the views of the men in this study on their experiences with HIV prevention materials and how HIV prevention might be improved. Their responses are presented with respect to first, the content of HIV materials and second, the delivery of HIV prevention.

8.5.1. Content of HIV Materials

At a very basic level, many of the men voiced their displeasure with the contradictory information they encountered online when looking for information about safer sex and HIV/STI transmission and prevention. For example, said one participant:

I looked up stuff about herpes…online. I think I have it….From what I’ve read online, it seems like its something that’s (a) hard to diagnose and (b) you could have had it for a long time and never showed it; (c) it can’t be cured anyway so you just don’t have sex when it’s obvious that you have it….I read a fourth thing that said you could be passing it on even when you don’t have any signs of it and then I’m like well, fuck, you’re just fucked then, so who fucking knows? (008: 34, gay, HIV-)

This example gives a good sense of the sort of frustration the men experienced in seeking information about sexual health on the Internet, and may account for the misunderstandings that men encountered about it, as discussed in an earlier chapter. Accordingly, men made requests for initiatives which clearly presented facts and which illustrated the consequences of infection by HIV and/or STIs as a means of driving home an important message.

There was also a sense among the men that HIV prevention needed to better respond to a “generational gap” in the experience of HIV/AIDS. Men remarked about the differences between the visibility of HIV/AIDS when it first became known versus the current experience where much is known about it and the physical signs of AIDS are less visible due to HIV treatment. As one of the older participants put it, “It tends to be if you’re sort of under 30 or 35,
you just have a completely different attitude than somebody my age….They don’t view…HIV in the same way that I do at all, completely different. Their experience is completely different…they didn’t grow up with all their friends dropping dead, they haven’t got that sense” (005: 49, gay, HIV+).

This theme was not only presented by the older participants – it was also picked up by the younger ones as well. Take for instance the story of the following participant, some 23 years younger than the one above:

I was born in [19]81 and men having sex with other men was always equated with AIDS which was always equated with death. And that’s always been there. Sex equals death. I don’t know what it was like for…I have a number of friends in their 40s and 50s who lost everyone and it’s weird because sometimes they’ll take about how young kids don’t know what it’s like….And I don’t know if people don’t know what it’s like because no one talks about what it was like because it’s too hard to talk about…you know, I can’t even talk about it and I wasn’t there, I don’t know anyone who’s died. And yet I feel like…I would like to ‘get real’ about talking about HIV and what it means for me and my sex and for the men around me but I don’t, and they don’t, and the posters don’t. (003: 26, gay, HIV-)

This is a lengthy quotation but an illustrative one, because it demonstrates how current prevention initiatives can be short sighted. In this passage, the participant references a recent Toronto-area campaign, “Be Real,” aimed at encouraging all MSM to consider how their sexual behaviour not only affects themselves but also their communities (AIDS Committee of Toronto, 2006). This participant’s point is that there is not enough frank talk about HIV from men who have it or who have experienced it, and this is what he would see as a move in the right direction.

Apart from the substantive content of HIV prevention, most men expressed the need for HIV prevention to remain resonant with the specific experiences of gay men and men who have sex with men: “If they’re not geared toward gay guys, I also find them dumb, like with flowers or hearts or something like that…” (008: 34, gay, HIV-). It was likewise important for these men
that HIV prevention aim at moving beyond the “use a condom every time” message and instead focus on specific experiences that men encountered. One participant, for example, specifically talked about the “Think Again” campaign in Canada, which focused on the assumptions that men used in justifying unprotected sex: as he put it, “I can see why those ads would make sense to people who might have been barebacking because…I was like, yeah, Christ, that’s me!” (004: 41, gay, HIV+). Indeed, issues of cultural competence, resonance and homophily are central to health communication efforts (Dearing et al., 1996; Maibach, Rothschild, & Novelli, 2002; Rao & Svenkerud, 1998).

8.5.2. Delivery of HIV Prevention

In addition to their views on the actual content of HIV prevention materials, men also spoke to how the delivery of such initiatives could be improved.

A central theme was the location or channel of the message. Most of the men agreed that there should be more emphasis on HIV prevention initiatives that take place online. However, it is interesting to note that when asked, many of the men said that they had not noticed any particular initiatives in their online travels or if they did, they did not pay them much heed. Certainly it makes intuitive sense that if men are seeking sex online, then the online setting would be a place quite “close to the behaviour” to promote prevention (Kotler, Roberto, & Lee, 2002; Maibach et al., 2002).

However, there is an inherent paradox that was identified by a few of the participants. For instance, one participant noted: “you know, you’ll see this little like blue doodad in the corner [of the chatroom] about safer sex…and then there’s this guy online called ‘dirtprettythings’, HIV, bareback, top pig looking for bareback, HIV-negative bottom boys to go clubbing with” (009: 35, gay, HIV-). Such a perspective highlights an irony in trying to promote safer sex in an environment which itself can facilitate the expression of emphatically anti-safer sex selves. This raises the larger issue of how to make safer sex promotion attractive and prominent to men interacting in a setting which is ultimately about finding sex, an issue returned to in the next chapter.

Somewhat also to this end, men talked about the need to make safer sex information much more prominent on sex seeking websites. They also noted that persistence is very important to keep
awareness of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases at the forefront, both online and offline. Men also talked about exploiting the unique attributes of the Internet for health communication, moving from text-based provision of information to more interactive and graphical-based transfer of knowledge.

In sum, a number of key themes emerged in these discussions: the need for prevention to be resonant with the experiences of MSM; clear and unambiguous; prominent; persistent; and interactive. It is instructive to note that men were generally able to recall and talk more about offline campaigns than they were online ones, notwithstanding the fact that many felt they did not pay too much attention to HIV prevention initiatives overall because they felt they were already well informed.

8.6. Discussion

This first section of this chapter argued that an online “sex seeking” subculture has manifested as MSM turn to the Internet to find sexual partners. While this subculture has been influenced in some ways by the offline gay culture, it has also developed unique normative guides, such as guidelines on how to present one’s “self” to successfully attract a desired partner and certain “rules of engagement” about how to find sexual partners and negotiate the sexual encounter.

As earlier, other literature has described the ways in which men can learn more about gay culture through interactions with gay men online (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Engler et al., 2005; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Sanders, 2008). However, this literature does not explicitly consider how the online sex-seeking process itself takes place within a specific subculture. While there is some allusion to such an online subculture in other work – Brown et al. (2005), for instance, remark that “the Internet offers a range of specialised [sic] chat rooms, bulletin boards, and other settings, each possibly developing its own cultural rules and norms among very specific subcultures and groups” (p. 71) – there has not been a great amount of specific focus on this particular area.

It is important to acknowledge this subculture, because it adds another layer of context to the sexual search that may influence men’s sexual risk management. For instance, men new to same-sex relations face a double duty of having to learn about gay culture, as well as the ways in which the successfully navigate the online subculture, which is often the first contact with gay
culture that these men experience. Future research might consider this subcultural aspect further and explicitly investigate how men learn and navigate the subculture and the potential impacts on their sexual risk behaviour, especially with a focus on how men learn and deploy folk knowledges of sexual safety. Research might also consider the development of subcultures around risk behaviour, such as barebacking. Berg (2008), for instance, suggests that the “Internet’s virtual social norm of unsafe sex thus presents limited opposition to barebacking and helps explain why some MSM develop along behavioral trajectories that lead to bareback sex” (p. 830).

The second part of this chapter considered the ways in which men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes could influence their offline worlds. Much of this study has argued the ways in which the offline contexts could come to influence men’s online experiences. The discussion in this chapter showed that the opposite could be true as well, that men’s online experiences could impact their offline experiences.

In some cases, these impacts were positive. For instance, some men talked about the central role that the Internet played in helping them learn more about, and feel more comfortable with, their nascent same-sex interests. This may be particularly important for men newer to same-sex relations, especially younger MSM, who have been shown to use the Internet as a main source of information on learning about “being gay” and sexual health. Kubicek et al. (2008), for instance, found in their study that young MSM have “limited sources of relevant information for their own sexual health” (p. 234), potentially leading to riskier sexual encounters; indeed, the young MSM in their study relied heavily on the Internet as a source of information about gay men’s health (see also Bond et al., in press; Zhang et al., 2007).

On the other hand, there were some suggestions of negative consequences of men’s Internet use, including the idea that the Internet made it easy for men, especially those new to same-sex relations, to avoid becoming involved in gay communities. This issue relates to a more general concern that the Internet may be usurping the importance of, and indeed the existence of, gay communities. Rosser et al. (2008), for instance, report on an international consultation on gay communities (in North America, Europe, South Africa and Australia and New Zealand) which suggested that online gay communities were becoming larger than the offline communities. Their report also suggested a decline in gay-focused HIV prevention across these areas (see also
Rowe & Dowsett, 2008). Combined, these findings underline the importance for online HIV prevention that is effective, insofar as virtual gay communities come to replace offline ones, and to reach MSM who might not otherwise be reached through traditional means.

To this end, the final part of this chapter considered men’s own views on the HIV prevention materials they had encountered, what they thought of those materials, and how they thought that HIV prevention might be improved – both offline and online. It is particularly important to gain insight into men’s own views on HIV prevention if it to be responsive to them. These findings contribute to a small literature that has sought direct input from MSM on their HIV prevention needs (Hooper et al., 2008; Morin et al., 2003; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000).

The next chapter uses the findings from these other studies, in combination from the findings of this study on men’s online experiences and their views on HIV prevention, to make suggestions for how future prevention efforts might be improved.
Chapter 9
Implications for Prevention, Theory and Method

9.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter considers the implications of the findings presented in the previous chapters for HIV prevention as well as for social research theory and method. The first section of this chapter overviews the concept of “structuring contexts” developed through the preceding chapters. The next section focuses on HIV prevention, with a discussion of some promises and pitfalls for the Internet in HIV prevention, and suggestions of directions for HIV prevention. The final part of this chapter outlines how the research objectives and questions were answered through this study, considers implications of these findings for social research theory and method more generally, offers directions for future research, and speaks to the strengths and limitations of this study.

9.2. “Structuring Contexts”: Structure, Interaction and Men’s Use of the Internet for Sexual Purposes

The preceding chapters have demonstrated how the men’s use of the Internet was more broadly situated within their social and sexual lives. The discussion developed and utilized the concept of “structuring contexts” to refer to all those contexts, circumstances and factors in which men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes was situated. This section provides an overview of the situated nature of the men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes in this particular sample.

Contextual factors played a role from the outset in men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives, as the discussions in chapter 5 showed. In their accounts of their use of the Internet for sexual purposes, the men viewed the Internet as a solution to challenges they experienced in meeting men in more traditional offline venues. These “challenges” could be taken as proxies of broader “structuring contexts” at play, from the macro – homophobia, the marginalization of homosexuality – to the meso – the exclusionary experience of gay communities – and the local levels – isolation, a lack of social networks and/or lack of a gay community in which to participate. Thus in many cases men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes was not often a decision made simply because they wanted a new place to find sex partners; instead, it was a response to the contextual situations the men found themselves in. For this reason, the Internet
could mean much more than simply a place to find sex, especially for men new to same-sex relations, who used the Internet for their first and sometimes only connection with other men on a sexual level.

Once online, men found that they had to learn the rules of an online subculture to attract the sorts of partners and sexual encounters they desired. As discussed in chapter 6, men learned to give legitimated performances in order to successfully attract partners online. These performances often meant being very cautious about how they presented themselves and how they acted and in some cases meant that they had to refigure their own understandings of self to fit the “proper” descriptions online. Interestingly, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the norms of the offline sex-seeking world came to structure the online one. Thus even in the (so-called) “liberated” world of cyberspace, men’s performances of self nonetheless had to accord to what was seen as desirable in the gay community, with a concomitant emphasis on issues such as attractiveness, age and race. The online subculture also provided guides for the proper “rules of engagement” in online interactions. These online norms similarly acted as “structuring contexts” within which men had to interact and, at the same time, these interactions helped to reproduce those very structures.

At the same time as men were presenting their own selves online, the men were likewise interpreting the “selves” of their potential partners for issues of compatibility. Compatibility encompassed like-mindedness on issues of sexual safety, where men chose partners based upon their portrayals of sexual safety in their profiles, as well as what the men “gave off” in their pre-meeting chats. Men in the study used strategies to divine the potential sexual safety of their partners through these online chats, where it was somewhat easier to discuss potentially sensitive topics such as safer sex and sexual safety. In constructing their potential partners, men drew upon cultural discourses, especially as they tried to intuit the safety of their potential partners through numerous criteria.

“Structuring contexts” continued to play a role in men’s sexual encounters. While the men on the whole were committed to safer sex, some men did have unprotected sexual encounters. For some of the men, these encounters were planned and voluntary. In such cases, men used specific strategies to rationalize their risks of unprotected sex, such as serosorting, strategic positioning, withdrawal, and engaging in unprotected sex in monogamous, long-term relationships.
Following social risk theory, such cases demonstrated how risk can be rationalized and situated within particular contexts.

On the other hand, there were cases where men had unprotected sex even though they were otherwise committed to having safer sex, or found themselves in situations where sexual risk was a possibility. Such cases are particularly enlightening for understanding how sexual risk is socially-situated, because they expose the factors involved with men’s management of sexual risk. In some of these cases, unprotected sex occurred when safer sex preparations failed due to interactional elements in the sexual encounter; for instance, men misread non-verbal signals or there were miscommunications about sexual safety. These cases illustrate how sexual risk must be understood from the context in which it occurs. In these cases, condoms were present and intended to be used, but they were not due to situations which arose in the actual sexual encounter. Indeed in cases like this, intentions for safer sex are not enough to ensure that safer sex actually occurs.

In other cases, unprotected sex played a more functional role for the men in the study. In a number of cases, men engaged in or came close to engaging in unprotected sex because they wanted to preserve and/or cultivate a particularly desirable connection. Common in these situations were men’s exclamations that they were desperate for connection, especially a long-term one. For some men, finding connection with another man was a very difficult situation to come by, thus they did not want to do anything that might spoil that encounter. Sometimes the men wanted the casual encounter to become a longer-term commitment, and they saw unprotected sex as a means for that to happen. In such situations, the men’s desire for connections and the difficulties they experienced in finding partners were contextual factors that came into play in their management of sexual risk. These broader factors provided the structure for men’s sexual interactions, which came to influence how the men managed their perceptions and practice of sexual risk behaviour.

In other cases, men found themselves in an opposite situation, where they wanted to end a particularly undesirable connection. Oftentimes here men did not know how to end the encounter, other than simply going through with it. Such cases speak to issues of agency and assertiveness in rejecting unwanted sexual encounters, but they also spoke to how issues of
social “courtesy” and a sense of obligation could play a role in encouraging risky situations, again emphasizing interactional elements involved in sexual risk behaviour.

In sum, the social risk perspective taken in this study helps illuminate how sexual risk behaviour is situated within interactional and contextual factors. Men did not engage in unprotected sex because they did not know better or because they were acting “irrationally.” Instead, unprotected sex occurred or was a possibility because of a complex interplay between the contexts men brought to the sexual interaction and indeed the interactions that occurred within the encounter itself. The sexual risk behaviour was therefore solidly socially-situated.

The overarching argument in this study is that in order to fully appreciate how men use the Internet for sexual purposes, it is necessary to take a comprehensive view of that use, especially accounting for the context of that use. As the discussion here has shown, every aspect of men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes was situated in some form of context. These contexts may thus be considered “structuring contexts” as they come to influence the interactions that occur within those contexts.

The above discussion situated men’s use of the Internet within their social contexts, and demonstrated how men’s experiences online could be likewise situated and influenced by the structure of the online sex seeking subculture. While it showed that unprotected sex among men in the sample was likewise situated in the sexual encounter and its encompassing context, it did not speak specifically to how the Internet could contribute to instances of unprotected sex. This question is taken up in the next section.

9.3. The Internet in the Sexual Lives of MSM: Promises and Pitfalls for HIV Prevention

As described earlier, this study was designed to respond to two main issues in Internet sex-seeking and HIV prevention. First, there is a widespread call for HIV prevention to become more responsive to the actual experiences of MSM; as Adam et al. (2005) put it, “since prevention necessarily appeals to those engaging in a practice, it cannot get emic understandings [explanations that make sense to the observed] wrong, or prevention messages will be ineffective” (p. 239). As many of the participants in this study themselves noted, it is imperative that prevention initiatives be resonant with men’s own experiences.
Likewise, given the increasing popularity of the Internet as a venue for MSM to find sexual partners, there are calls for online HIV prevention efforts, which similarly must be responsive to the men’s experiences in using the Internet in their sexual lives. As Brown et al. (2005) put it, “If health promotion initiatives are to maintain…effectiveness within cyberspace, they need to engage with participants in ways that are consistent with how the Internet is used and what it means to participants to be part of the environment [italics added]” (p. 71).

Accordingly, this study aimed to respond to both of these issues. Its overarching goal was to investigate the complexities and nuances of men’s experiences with the Internet in their sexual lives to ask what could be learned for HIV prevention. This study used social risk theory to provide a new lens on men’s engagement with and management of sexual risk, and to illuminate the role the Internet may play in men’s experiences with sexual risk. Beyond this specific focus, the study also considered the ways in which men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes was situated more broadly in the men’s social and sexual lives, to give a more comprehensive picture of the role the Internet played for these men in their sexual lives.

The preceding chapters have shown how the use of the Internet in the men’s sexual lives was situated more broadly, from going online, to finding a partner, and finally to an offline sexual encounter. The preceding chapters developed the concept of “structuring contexts,” which refers to all of those broader circumstances and factors that could influence men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes.

Given the interest in this study on HIV prevention, there was a specific concern with the implications of the situated nature of Internet use for sexual risk management and behavior. In the majority of cases, men had protected sex with their partners met online (as well as offline, where relevant). Nonetheless, there were stories among the men in the study of “risk” and “risky” situations, and the social risk perspective used in this study helped illuminate the role the Internet played in both of those situations. At the same time, the preceding discussions also highlighted the ways that the Internet could support safer sexual encounters.

Brown et al. (2005) provided some early insight into the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet for sexual safety. In a similar fashion, this section consolidates preceding discussions on the ways in which the Internet offers both promises and pitfalls for sexual risk behaviour and HIV transmission. This perspective helps illuminate directions that HIV prevention may go in
order to become more responsive to the experiences of MSM who use the Internet in their sexual lives, an issue taken up in the next section.

9.3.1. Promise

As discussed in the previous chapters, the Internet is a setting that allows men to express their safer sex intentions in ways not possible in offline settings. First, online profiles allow men to convey their safer sex intentions from the outset so that, in theory, men who see their profiles will know automatically that they are looking for safer sex encounters (or vice versa). In a similar way, men can decide whether or not to interact with a specific partner based on the way in which safer sex (or lack thereof) is conveyed in his profile. This unique attribute of the Internet helps put safer sex on the table before any contact – sexual or otherwise – has been made.

Similarly, the nature of online communication may make it easier to broach a sensitive topic such as safer sex negotiation. This makes it easier for men to clarify their safer sexual intentions, and ask questions of their potential partners to inquire about their potential safety. Again the Internet provides a unique benefit here in making it easier to discuss safer sex, which might otherwise be an awkward topic to raise. To the extent to which safer sex may be a difficult issue for men to broach, the Internet provides an opportunity to negotiate a safer sexual encounter in a more comfortable way.

Beyond the implications for constructing safer sexual encounters, the Internet may also help men who are sexually interested in other men develop healthy sexualities. Many of the men in this study who were just exploring their same-sex interests remarked about the centrality of the Internet in their sexual lives, and the important part it played in connecting them with other gay men or MSM. These experiences helped them grow more comfortable with their emerging sexualities. It helped them learn about “being gay” and it helped them feel less isolated, especially in contexts which were not particularly forgiving of issues related to same-sex attraction.

For the men in this study, the Internet emerged as a very important tool, notwithstanding the timing within which it entered into the men’s sexual careers. For men who had longer histories of same-sex relations, the Internet helped them improve or supplement their sexual seeking
pursuits. For men with less mature sexual lives, the Internet played a central role, as above, in connecting them with other similarly minded men. Thus as the preceding discussions showed, while the ostensible reason for being online might have been looking for sex, the Internet actually had deeper and more varied meanings for the men using it in their sexual lives.

From an HIV prevention standpoint, then, the Internet offers numerous advantages for encouraging safer sexual behaviour. However, situations of unprotected sex and/or “risky” situations did occur among men in the sample, despite the protections afforded by the Internet. This finding suggests that there are potential pitfalls related to the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM, to which the focus now turns.

9.3.2. Pitfalls

If HIV prevention is to be responsive to men’s experiences in using the Internet in their sexual lives, it must pay specific attention to how men engage with sexual risk in the contexts of that risk. The social risk perspective used in this study helped explore “risk” encounters to understand how the sexual risk behaviour was situated more broadly. At the same time, a situated perspective on men’s use of the Internet also helps illuminate how the Internet use and its contexts may combine to create potentially “risky” situations where men are faced with less than ideal sexual encounters.

9.3.2.1. Breached “Ground Rules”

As above, finding sexual partners through the Internet provides men with a means to portray their safer sex intentions and negotiate safer sex in a more direct and comfortable way. Profiles allow men to state their safer sex intentions from the outset, and pre-meeting chats offer the men opportunities to preconfigure “ground rules” for the ensuing sexual encounter (e.g., Brown et al., 2005). While in most cases this “shared sexual script” played out according to plan, there were times where it did not, and these ground rules were breached in the offline sexual encounter. The social risk perspective in this study demonstrated how both the context of the sexual encounter and interaction in the encounter could disrupt the sexual script and override the pre-determined safer sexual expectations of the encounter. The findings showed that such disruptions could also occur with scripts about negotiated sexual acts and their boundaries, suggesting issues of physical safety as well as sexual safety.
This perspective helps illustrates how the “protections” offered by the Internet may be mediated or diminished by the contexts that surround men’s Internet use, drawing attention again to the importance of considering Internet use and sexual risk behaviour from a situated-perspective. Accordingly, it is very important for HIV prevention acknowledge and consider these “disruptive” elements which would cause negotiated agreements to go awry, and to provide men with awareness and means for dealing with those situations.

9.3.2.2. Developing “Trust” in Online Relationships

The ability to converse online with a potential sexual partner before meeting affords men the opportunity to negotiate safer sex. However, as men in this study demonstrated, these pre-meeting chats were about more than merely establishing “ground rules.” Men were also engaged in a process of constructing their potential partners on criteria of sexual safety, drawing on discourse about the characteristics of a “risky” partner versus a “safe” partner. Profiles played a role in these constructions, but so did the pre-meeting chats. In these communications men could “quiz” their potential partners on these criteria of safety.

It was argued that the Internet provides a very different venue for these types of discussions than would occur in traditional places for finding sex partners. The disinhibited nature of the Internet communication, to which many of the participants alluded, facilitated asking questions which men may not be comfortable asking in other situations. Men, therefore, are able to construct a more “accurate” picture of their partners and their potential safety through these discussions.

The key question then becomes how men use this information to make decisions about their sexual behaviour. In many of these cases, men attempted to gauge the safety of their potential partner as a supplemental strategy to safer sex. In other words, they wanted to buttress the safety of the encounter by having protected sex with a partner that was seen to be “safe” in other respects. However, there was some sense among the HIV-negative men in this study that these discussions could come to play a role in decisions to have unprotected sex based on information gleaned about potential “safety” and/or their “intuitions” about their potential partners. In these cases, men became convinced that their partners were likewise HIV-negative, based on the online interactions, and subsequently engaged in unprotected sex.
This example speaks to how risk can be negotiated in an interactional setting, where the conversations helped men rationalize a potentially “risky” situation into a “safe” one. Although these cases were rare among men in this sample, they do raise the question of the relationship between online communication and the development of trust or understanding, and especially the extent to which men make decisions to have unprotected sex based on those discussions. As discussed previously, there is some suggestion in the literature on trust and Internet communication that people may project “idealized” qualities onto their potential partners, allowing them to become “too close too quickly.” Serosorting among HIV-negative partners requires an established understanding of HIV status and testing history that is difficult at best to safely establish in casual encounters. This is a particularly important issue for HIV prevention to be aware of and to address.

9.3.2.3. Conditioning Disempowered Encounters

The findings in this study also suggest a few ways in which the Internet may condition sexual encounters where men are disempowered in their ability to negotiate and/or enforce safer sex agreements.

First, there was suggestion in the data that the Internet in some cases can act as a “contextual catalyst” which may condition “risky” situations. As per the discussions in chapter 7, unprotected sex was seen to have a number of functions, such as preserving or nurturing a desired encounter. These findings were situated within men’s social contexts to show how they related more generally to issues of blocked social connections, loneliness, and a sometimes desperate desire for a connection with another man. It was argued that such contexts influenced how men engaged and managed sexual risk. Put another way, the context within which the sexual encounter occurred came to influence the men’s behaviour in the sexual encounter, as a social risk perspective helps illuminate. However, it could be argued – quite correctly – that these factors would impact the sexual risk management and behaviour regardless of where the partner was met.

But one must consider the role that the Internet plays in connecting men with other men. As the discussions in chapter 5 showed, many men used the Internet to find sexual partners because they were lonely, sometimes desperate, and had trouble finding partners in other venues. Interestingly, these were the same factors which were associated with the sexual risk behaviour
in some cases in this study. This finding suggests that the Internet may play a role in configuring “risky” situations insofar as it is the vehicle which facilitates the sexual encounter in which these broader contextual influences can come to play a role in the sexual risk management. In this sense, the Internet is the catalyst to the potentially “risky” situation. Perhaps no more so is this an important observation than for the men who use the Internet as their exclusive source of connection with other men. Again the social risk perspective helps illuminate this process, and it underlines again the importance of considering how men’s use of the Internet is situated within other factors in their lives.

A similar situation may face men who are new to same-sex relations and who use the Internet for their first encounters with same-sex relations. For instance, research has shown how men who are not “out” and who are inexperienced with same-sex relations can find themselves disempowered in the sexual encounter (Flowers, Smith, Sheeran, & Beail, 1998; Kubicek et al., 2008; Valentine & Skelton, 2003). The findings of this study showed that many of men new(er) to same-sex relations used the Internet to explore their sexuality, learn about safer sex, and they demonstrated some misunderstandings about safer sex and its practice. These findings suggest that these men may be particularly disempowered in their sexual encounters with other men, especially as they use the Internet to initiate their same-sex sexual careers. Such findings underline once again the need for HIV prevention to encompass the needs of all men who seek sex online, drawing attention again to the situated nature of that use.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Internet may play a role as a catalyst in contributing to disempowering conditions in the sexual encounter. As the examples demonstrated here indicate, conditions that lead to disempowerment in sexual situations are very similar to the contexts in which men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes are situated. Again, these disempowering conditions may occur regardless of where the sexual partner is met, but insofar as men are meeting their sex partners online, these are issues that online prevention interventions should address.

There were also some stories among men in the sample where they had gone through with unwanted sexual encounters either due to issues of social courtesy or an inability to refuse the encounter. Here, men continued with an unwanted encounter either because they felt it would be rude to do otherwise, or they simply did not know how to refuse or stop the encounter. In either
case, these situations could be of concern because they demonstrate instances where men could not assert themselves: if they felt an obligation to go through with the sexual encounter, they may also be disempowered in negotiating safer sex. While none of the men in this sample talked of having had unprotected sex in an unwanted encounter, the fact that these unwanted encounters would continue may present an issue from an HIV prevention perspective. While such “contractual” sex does occur with partners met offline, this study argues that the Internet may exacerbate this situation, given the difficulties in discerning one’s “true” appearance or personality online.

Meeting sexual partners online may contribute to disempowered conditions in another way. As argued in chapter 6, conceptualizations of the Internet as a liberating, disembodied “laboratory” for experimenting with one’s identity do not hold in the particular instance of online dating and sex seeking. Instead, this study has argued for the existence of an online subculture, which provides normative guidelines for behaviour. However, there were numerous ways in which the normative behaviour of this subculture reflected many of the norms and much of the discourse of the offline gay community. In short, instead of a liberating environment, the online sex seeking culture presented an environment not unlike the offline gay community, where dominant issues like youth, beauty, and race continue to play an important role. This fact may mean that men who have trouble finding sexual partners offline because they do not fit the “required criteria” may find similar problems online. This may have implications insofar as, as discussed above, these men have difficulties meeting partners online and when they do, they may become similarly disempowered in negotiating safer sex, due to issues of safer sex “trade offs.”

9.3.2.4. The Nature of Online Socialization

Sanders’ (2008) work importantly revealed the socialization function that the Internet can play for MSM, especially men who are new to the “scene,” and Brown et al. (2005) alluded to the development of online subcultures. However, these studies do not address two important issues identified by this present study. First, they do not consider how men are socialized into an online sex seeking culture. Second, there has been no critical appraisal of the nature of the information about sex, risk and sexual safety that men learn in their online interactions. This section is concerned with the latter issue.
Certainly some of the men in this study spoke implicitly and explicitly about how their conversations and interactions with other men online helped them learn about being gay, same-sex relations, and sexual safety. Some of the men, in fact, talked about how the Internet played a central role in teaching them about safer sex between men since this was a topic not covered in other areas. Without a doubt, the Internet plays a very important role in helping men understand and practice safer sex, as noted elsewhere (Bond et al., in press; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Kubicek et al., 2008; Sanders, 2008).

However, numerous men in this study talked about how they engaged “folk knowledges” in their sexual lives. Men talked about having unprotected sex with partners based on strategies of strategic positioning as well as intuiting the safety of their potential partners, which itself engaged “discourses of safety” regarding which partners are or are not safe. This raises a key question about how men learn these discourses and how they come accept and deploy them in their sexual lives. Indeed, to that extent that the Internet fills a socialization gap, especially for younger MSM or men new to same-sex relations (Kubicek et al., 2008), there is a question about whether the information men gain through socialization works for or against healthy sexual development and HIV/STI prevention.

To the extent that men learn about sexual practice through their online interactions with other MSM, there may be an issue of men becoming “socialized” into these discourses and rationalities of safety. Admittedly there was no direct evidence of this situation occurring among men in this study, but there was definitely a sense of learning about sexuality online as well as using these strategies in the men’s sexual lives. This raises an interesting avenue for future research, as well as potential avenues for HIV prevention.

In sum, this section has demonstrated how, based on the accounts of the men in this sample, the Internet offers much promise but also pitfalls in sexual risk management and potential for HIV prevention. Some caveats are necessary. First, some of these promises and pitfalls were more evident in some of men’s stories than others; however, this should not discount the fact that they did nonetheless occur. While it is difficult to say how generalizable the findings from this study are, it may be a safe assumption that similar processes occur among other MSM, given the parallels with some of the findings in this study with the extant literature. However, since this is
the first study to unpack “risk” and “risky” situations in this manner, more research in this area would be welcome.

Second, the issues raised here should not be considered statements of causality. In other words, these findings are not meant to represent simple and linear “if…then” statements. Such conclusions would not be possible with these data, nor are they expected. The purpose of this study was to explore men’s experiences in using the Internet for sexual purposes, and the situations raised here emerged out of these stories. Given the nature of the topic and investigation, it would not be possible to make causative statements. Instead, these stories are meant to raise issues about the potential ways in which the Internet may contribute to sexual risk situations through a lens that has not been used in the past. This is a particular strength of this study, in that it has used social theory – more specifically, social risk theory – to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the Internet fits into the lives of MSM and what implications that use may have for sexual risk management and behaviour.

The promises and pitfalls raised here offer some direction for effective online HIV prevention, to which the focus of the discussion now turns.

9.4. Implications for HIV Prevention

Most research in this area suggests that the Internet should be used for delivering HIV prevention interventions and health promotion, and some of the qualitative work has offered direction on how to do so (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Davis et al., 2006a, 2006b; Engler et al., 2005; Poon et al., 2005). This section draws upon the findings from this study to make additional suggestions for the direction of online HIV prevention.

9.4.1. Potential Directions for Online HIV Prevention

This section makes some suggestions for directions for online HIV prevention based on the findings from this study, but also taking into consideration the extant literature and interventions in this area discussed earlier in the literature review. This section is concerned with potential directions for both the content and delivery of online HIV prevention efforts.
9.4.1.1. Content

The findings from this study suggested four issues related to “risky” unprotected sex among men in the sample: (1) risky folk knowledges; (2) confusion about basic HIV/safer sex information; (3) disempowering conditions; and (4) false “protections” afforded by the Internet. The prevention implications of each are discussed here.

In the first instance, there were some cases of risky sexual situations, where men utilized folk knowledges to justify unprotected sex. For instance, HIV-negative men talked about the use of serosorting with casual partners, and using strategic positioning to lessen the risk of HIV transmission. There is a question here of how men – especially men new to same-sex relations – learn these folk knowledges, and how they come to justify their use in unprotected sex. As earlier, this speaks to a socialization issue, and is an area for future research. In the interim, HIV prevention might look to innovative ways of dispelling some of the myths of these knowledges in the hopes of encouraging men to utilize safer alternatives.

In the second instance, some of the men in the sample – again especially men new to same-sex relations – expressed their confusion with safer sex information, particularly its efficacy in preventing all sexually transmitted diseases. Some also expressed displeasure with information they found online which could be at times ambiguous and/or contradictory. These findings suggest that for some men, basic information provision about safer sex is necessary. However, there must be some way of ensuring that this information is current and not contradictory. Given the amount of health information available on the Internet – quality or otherwise – this may be a difficult undertaking. Nonetheless, this finding suggests that online interventions and/or information should be targeted to men new to the scene, who may have differing levels of knowledge regarding HIV transmission and prevention.

As earlier, for some men in the sample, unprotected sex occurred or was a possibility due to disempowering situations that could be conditioned by the Internet. For instance, men who were online due to extreme loneliness or desperation for connection had diminished capacity and/or agency in the sexual encounter to protect themselves. There was also some sense of “obligation” in sexual encounters, suggesting that men did not possess the skills to extricate themselves from unwanted sexual encounters. These findings underline the need for prevention interventions which are more comprehensive in scope, paralleling the findings of prevention needs
assessments arguing for a more contextual, comprehensive approach to prevention (Hooper et al., 2008; Morin et al., 2003; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000). HIV prevention in this respect should work towards building self-development, managing sexual identity issues, and building sexual communication skills among MSM, a point likewise underlined by Engler et al. (2005).

These findings on disempowerment, of course, are not restricted to meeting partners online. This study argued that in some cases, the Internet may act as a catalyst to facilitating sexual encounters where disempowering conditions play out in the encounter. Thus this issue should be dealt with in both online and offline HIV prevention. These findings also suggest a need for more structural change, as social risk perspectives are apt to expose (Latkin & Knowlton, 2005; Rhodes, 1997).

There is indeed an increasing realization in HIV prevention that successful prevention efforts cannot rely on a simple divide between “individual” and “structural” approaches to prevention; instead, initiatives must be comprehensive and encompass individual-level change as it is situated within the structures in which the behaviour occurs (Coates, Richter, & Caceres, 2008; Gupta, Parkhurst, Ogden, Aggleton, & Mahal, 2008; Merson et al., 2008; Wohlfeiler, 2000). In this particular case, efforts that combat homophobia and the marginalization of homosexuality more generally would be helpful to the extent that these issues can be related to unprotected sex. As echoed by participants in the needs assessments, the gay community would also benefit its members by becoming more inclusive (Morin et al., 2003; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000). “Structural interventions” (Wohlfeiler, 2000, p. S52) such as these might help ease some of the “disempowering” contexts which lead men to the Internet and, subsequently, to situations where agency to negotiate safer sex may be diminished. That being said, such structural change is difficult to achieve (Gupta et al., 2008), thus it is important to focus on more “local” means of intervention.

Finally, there is an issue of the failure of the unique “protections” offered by finding sexual partners on the Internet. The findings from this study showed how the “ground rules” set in the pre-meeting chats can dismantle in the interaction of the actual sexual encounter, especially when other contextual factors are at play, as above. The findings also showed the dangers of “pre-empting” safer sex through profiles and not having explicit discussions about the need for safer sex in the actual physical encounter. There was also some suggestion that men may
construct unfounded trust in the pre-meeting chats, leading to a false security in engaging in unprotected sex. To this end, online HIV prevention might consider interventions and/or awareness campaigns specifically addressing these issues online. Such interventions might provide men with “best practices” in meeting sexual partners online, underlining the need to make explicit safer sexual intentions (see also Davis et al., 2006a), to question unprotected sex based on “trust” in the pre-meeting chats, and to question discourses of “safety.”

In sum, the findings from this study suggest some avenues for the content of HIV prevention, to better respond to men’s own experiences online and the multitude of ways in which the Internet figures into their sexual lives. The findings from this study suggest a number of approaches: one to provide basic factual information for those who have misunderstandings about safer sex and its practice (e.g., men new to same-sex relations); one to provide “best practices” in meeting men online and negotiating safer sex with them; and one to provide a more comprehensive approach to HIV prevention which encompasses more contextual issues involved with unprotected sex. Each of these approaches is grounded in the men’s own experiences, and parallel what has been said in other needs assessments (Hooper et al., 2008; Morin et al., 2003; Seal, Kelly et al., 2000). A key question then becomes the best means of delivering such interventions online.

9.4.1.2. Reach and Delivery

An important question is why the Internet is important for HIV prevention. The short answer is that the Internet is a place where men meet sexual partners, so it would appear to be a logical place for health promotion. However, as this study has demonstrated, the Internet can play different roles in the sexual lives of MSM depending on the time of its entrance into men’s sexual careers and their social contexts. Accordingly, for gay men with longer histories of meeting male sexual partners both online and offline, the Internet may be another place to target health promotion initiatives that are particularly “close” to the sex seeking behaviour. However, for other men, the Internet may provide their first and sometimes only place for connection with other men for sexual purposes. In this respect, HIV prevention initiatives are integrally important because the Internet may be the only way to reach these men directly. This fact may be especially true for non-gay-identified MSM and men new to same-sex relations who meet sex partners online, especially given the following finding from a recent systematic review on behavioural interventions for reducing HIV transmission risk among MSM:
When they can be reached, [non-gay-identified MSM] may be more responsive than gay-identified men to risk reduction efforts. Non-gay identified MSM may have had less exposure to previous prevention messages, so their initial exposure may have a greater impact [italics added]. (Johnson et al., 2008)

The Internet is one place where indeed these men can be reached directly.

Some of the approaches raised by this study advocate some basic information provision. However, it is important that this information be presented in ways which exploit the advantages that the Internet presents for health communication. Indeed, it has been noted that the passive dissemination of health information in cyberspace is the “most common strategy and the least effective” (Neuhauser & Kreps, 2003, p. 11). The Internet represents a unique health communication channel in that it allows for interpersonal and mass communication, with the ability to deliver tailored and interactive health messages (e.g., Cassell, Jackson, & Cheuvront, 1998; Neuhauser & Kreps, 2003; Street, Gold, & Manning, 1997). Thus interventions could be designed following what has already been done, such as interactive websites and/or chatroom outreach. The difference here would be the content, which would be more responsive to what men’s actual needs are, and to be relevant to their actual experiences online. To this end, outreach and/or websites might focus campaigns specifically to address “best practices” in meeting men online, or safer sex resources for men who are confused by what they have already encountered. It is possible that the greater relevance of this information may increase interest in the interventions; this would be an area for future research. Peer-led education would continue to be important in this respect.

Delivery methods such as interactive websites and outreach may be effective for delivering the more comprehensive HIV prevention suggested here. Again, it may be a question of content and devising these campaigns so that they are directed towards these specific issues, as opposed to general sexual health issues. For instance, websites might be designed specifically around contextual issues and assertiveness skill building. A key might be advertising these initiatives as such. Again, this is an area for future research.

Finally, there is suggestion in the literature that MSM use the Internet to become acculturated to the gay community (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Engler et al., 2005; Sanders, 2008), and the
findings from this study suggested similarly. To the extent that men are learning about sexual practice from other MSM in cyberspace, peer-led, opinion-leader models may be an effective solution (Brown et al., 2005; Poon et al., 2005; see also Valente et al., 2006). Such models have been shown to be effective in offline settings, as demonstrated by the pioneering efforts by Kelly and colleagues (1991; 1997; 2004) which have been successfully applied in other settings (Amirkhanian et al., 2005; Amirkhanian, Kelly, Kabakchieva, McAuliffe, & Vassileva, 2003).

In these interventions, “popular” men in community settings were recruited and trained as peer educators who worked risk reduction messages into natural conversations with their peers. The peer leaders personally endorsed these messages, thereby lending their familiarity, popularity, and credibility as peer leaders to the messages themselves and helping to influence norms about safer sex behaviour. The programs were sustained by training successive waves of peer leaders. These interventions, based in gay bars in small US cities, helped reduce risky sexual behaviour by almost 30% from their baseline levels (Kelly, 2004, p. 140). A similar intervention in Russia and Bulgaria showed likewise declines in unprotected intercourse among MSM (Amirkhanian et al., 2005).

However, in some cases, these peer-led interventions have not been successful. Two studies from the UK, one in England (Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001a; Elford, Sherr, Bolding, Serle, & Maguire, 2002) and one in Scotland (Flowers, Hart, Williamson, Frankis, & Der, 2002), both found that their interventions, modeled on the American efforts, were unsuccessful in bringing about similar behavioural changes (see also Elford, Sherr et al., 2002). However, in both cases, there were deployment issues: recruiting and retaining peer educators was problematic; peer educators found it difficult to talk about sexual topics with strangers, as the intervention required; and there was little take up of the intervention by the target MSM (Elford, Hart, Sherr, Williamson, & Bolding, 2002). As the England group put it, “rather than peer education not working, it simply didn’t happen” (Elford, Sherr et al., 2002, p. 358). Kelly (2004) himself commented on these failures, noting that they did not follow the core elements of the popular opinion leader model.

A potential innovative avenue for HIV prevention may be using such an opinion leader model in cyberspace. While other interventions have used peer educators in chatroom outreach, it has not been in the same vein as the models developed by Kelly et al. Rhodes (2004) approximated such
a model, but again the core concepts of the popular opinion leader model were not followed – especially identifying popular leaders in the setting, as opposed to importing one, whether or not the “import” was indeed a community member.

Cyberspace seems a particularly promising candidate for such an approach, given that men learn about sex through their online interactions and networks. As Sanders (2008) noted, men’s online interactions in his study “inadvertently helped refine their knowledge of gay male culture and the mechanics of sex” (p. 269; see also Poon et al., 2005), and this present study had similar findings. Further, the disinhibited nature of online communication may help overcome the problem of discussing sexual topics with strangers. Moreover, such an approach could also take advantage of the increasingly popular social networking applications, such as Facebook or Twitter. An interesting adjunct to this approach would be discovering how men – especially those new to same-sex relations – develop “folk knowledges” to justify unprotected sex with relatively casual partners.

A key challenge, of course, in all of these efforts would be attracting the interest of the target MSM audiences. As the review of current online intervention efforts showed, it was difficult to get men involved, and higher-risk men tended to not participate. Further, some of the participants in this study themselves noted that when men are online looking for sex, prevention initiatives may not be at the top of their attention. Men also noted that they do not notice online health promotion efforts because they feel they are already well informed. The literature review also showed some problems with chatroom outreach interventions, where men resented the presence of health workers as antithetical to the purposes of the chatroom (Hallett et al., 2007; Rhodes, 2004).

A definite answer to this question – and indeed to the efficacy of many of the avenues raised here – is beyond the scope of this study. However, this study has proposed potentially fruitful avenues for HIV prevention, both with respect to content and delivery, based on the experiences of MSM. Suggestions have also been made for efforts which respond better to the realities of “Web 2.0” and take advantage of the online interactivity that the Internet affords (Rietmeijer & McFarlane, 2009). Future research could consider these avenues and attempt pilot studies and evaluations of their utilization to appraise their relevance and efficacy as prevention initiatives.
Thus this study has argued for a broader understanding of the role of the Internet in the sexual lives of MSM, especially as it is situated within their broader experiences. The issues raised by the MSM in this study as well as those outlined in the previous chapter are reminiscent of a similar issue – to have HIV prevention that responds to men’s needs more broadly, as they are situated within their own experiences. This perspective further underlines the need for HIV prevention to go beyond basic information provision to respond more appropriately to what men’s actual prevention needs are. Indeed, Seal et al. (2000) study instructively concluded that HIV prevention “must be embedded in the context of broader life and relationship issues” facing MSM (p. 22), and that efforts “must address larger social structures that impede the healthy development of young men’s sexual identity and safer sex behaviour” (p. 23).

It bears repeating that interventions aimed at reducing unprotected sex in Internet-arranged encounters must respond to both the individual and structural levels. The recommendations made based on the findings from this study demonstrate a need to respond to individual-level issues, such as making explicit agreements for safer sex and managing trust in online relationships, but also more structural-level issues, such as addressing homophobia and the cleavages within the gay community itself which can lead to men’s diminished agency to negotiate safer sex. As Coates et al. (2008) note, effective HIV prevention requires “combination behavioural prevention,” encompassing numerous levels of intervention, from the individual through to the community (p. 673). To this end, the structural interactionist underpinning of this study makes for a useful means of conceptualizing HIV prevention which can respond to men’s experiences, by focusing intervention both at the interaction (i.e., behavioural strategies) and the context within which that interaction occurs (i.e., structural strategies).

9.5. Implications for Theory and Method

This study has made contributions to both theory and method in social research. To theory, this study has confirmed and expanded theoretical thought in Internet communication and social risk theory. To methods, this study has provided further insight into the use of ethnography to study online worlds as well as to access contextual factors in risk management and behaviour. It has also demonstrated the use of online interviewing. Each of these issues are taken up in this section.
9.5.1. Theoretical Contributions

9.5.1.1. Internet and “Liberated” Communication

As discussed earlier, the Internet, in early research, had been touted as a liberating place for communication, where social actors could interact free of the issues that might have made interaction in the offline world difficult, such as distance or disability. While this still may be true in some cases, this study, like others, has shown that the context of the Internet interaction is of utmost importance in understanding how “liberated” one can be in presentations of self and interactions online. Particularly when the point of the interaction is an offline meeting, especially for dating or sexual purposes, the physical self reasserts its primary importance. Moreover, as technological advances make it easier to present a physical self online, through pictures and video, more is expected of online interactants to reveal their embodied self.

Men in this study underlined the importance of the picture of a potential partner – whether visual or video – in making their decision about whether or not to meet. In this respect, one cannot be liberated from one’s offline self because the offline physical self becomes a central focus in the online interactions, in these particular contexts. This importance of the aesthetic in the sexual search among MSM is also interesting because it demonstrates how offline norms and discourse can come to structure online interactions: physical “beauty” becomes as important online as it does offline. In sum, this study follows a line of more recent research that has demonstrated that early conceptualizations of the Internet as a disembodied and liberated medium have been tempered by technological advances and the use of the Internet for different purposes (i.e., meeting in person as opposed to strictly online chatting).

9.5.1.2. Structural Interactionism and Social Risk Theory

This study drew upon structural interactionism to understand how men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes was situated more broadly in their social lives and experiences, particularly to understand how those broader contexts intersected with men’s use of the Internet for this purpose as well as their sexual risk management and behaviour. This study represents one of the first
attempts to use social theory to understand the links between the Internet and men’s engagement with sexual risk.

This approach permitted a very high-level view of the myriad of factors at the macro, meso and micro levels that may influence sexual risk management and behaviour. The structural interactionist perspective illuminated how many structural issues could come to influence men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives, including homophobia, the marginalization of homosexuality, sexual orientation and openness of it, physical geography, and experiences with the gay community. At the same time, it showed how these structures could influence men’s online interactions, which in turn helped support and reproduce those very structures; for instance, men’s online experiences showed how offline discourses and norms of interaction (e.g., the importance of the aesthetics, the politics of age and race) were “imported” into the online world and continued to structure interactions there. In this way, the analysis sought to link men’s use and perspectives on the Internet in their sexual lives with broader factors in their social lives, permitting an exploration of the intersections between “broader social structures and subjective experience” (Eakin & MacEachen, 1998, p. 900). The study proposed the concept of “structuring contexts” to refer to all of those layers in which men’s use of the Internet was situated.

While this study was able to identify these broader structures involved with men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes, it also sought to understand these structures might relate to sexual risk behaviour. Social risk theory permitted such an analysis. This approach showed how unprotected sex in these encounters – both offline and online – were likewise influenced by broader structures. In fact, in many of the cases of unprotected sex in sexual encounters arranged online, the structural factors which diminished men’s agency to negotiate safer sex were the same ones that surrounded their Internet use from the outset. The social risk approach facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of unprotected sex in these cases, moving beyond the individual level. This analysis permitted the identification of new avenues for HIV prevention.

As earlier, this study was designed to address two related issues in the HIV prevention literature: first, a more comprehensive understanding of how the Internet fits into the sexual lives of MSM, and second, HIV prevention that responds better to men’s own experiences. Taken together, the social theory used in this study helped work towards these two goals by providing a more
comprehensive view of how men’s Internet use fits into both their sexual lives and their social lives and experiences more generally and, by considering such an analysis, making suggestions for HIV prevention which better respond to how men actually use the Internet in their sexual lives and the issues that they face in managing sexual risk. The findings from this study draw attention to the fact that men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives is situated more broadly, and that to understand sexual risk management, there must be an understanding of the context(s) in which that risk occurs.

9.5.2. Methodological Contributions

This study was conceived as a focused ethnography to investigate the shared experiences of MSM who use the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes. An ethnographic approach was particularly useful for this study for two reasons: first, it allowed an examination of how the online “sex seeking” world worked, and second, it facilitated analysis of men’s interactions within their broader context and what those implications may be for sexual risk management and behaviour.

To this end, the analysis showed the existence of an online sex seeking subculture. This subculture provided norms around the “rules of engagement” in online sex seeking, as well as set guidelines for a successful “e-presentation of self.” Men in the study spoke about having to “learn the system” to facilitate successful encounters, and they also spoke about refining their online processes as they became more familiar with that system. The analysis also showed how these online norms largely reflected dominant norms and discourse from the offline gay community, and demonstrated how these norms could structure online interactions, such as how men presented their selves and interacted with others in the chatrooms.

The qualitative and ethnographic approach was an appropriate means to accessing contextual and structural issues which may have been difficult to uncover through other approaches. Men in the study spoke both explicitly and implicitly about the numerous contexts in which their use of the Internet for sexual purposes occurred, as well as in which their experiences of unprotected sex occurred. This approach allowed insight into both the men’s offline and online worlds, and how their experiences in each could influence the other.
From a data collection point of view, this study contributes to the ongoing debate about the efficacy of online interviews. Online interviewing has grown in popularity and has been used in numerous studies (Lombardo & Gillett, 2006), especially among studies involving MSM (Ayling & Mewse, 2009; Davis et al., 2004). Indeed, it was used in almost all of the qualitative work that exists in this particular field. However, as mentioned earlier, some research has questioned the usefulness of online interviews; Davis et al. (2004), for example, found that online interviews in their study of MSM and Internet sex-seeking were slow, produced less data, and were fraught with technical problems. This study was no exception in some respects – in many cases, the depth of the discussion in the online interviews was less than that of the offline interviews.

However, one must also consider the nature of the interviewee in these cases. The interviews of this study were particularly intrusive in that they asked very sensitive questions about men’s sexual lives and experiences. Such questions might be doubly sensitive for men who are new to same-sex relations and would understandable be hesitant to discuss their sexual experiences with a researcher who is largely a complete stranger. However, the online environment offered a place for such men to share their experiences for the purposes of research in a less threatening environment.

Indeed, the same reasons that men go online to find sexual partners can also be a benefit to researchers. In this study, a greater proportion (67%) of non-gay-identified men were interviewed online, as opposed to the gay-identified men (29%). Such data suggest that non-gay-identified men may be more likely to participate in such a study if they can do so easily and with guarantees of anonymity. While the substance of these interviews may have been less than the face-to-face interviews, it can be argued that some data are better than no data, especially for understudied populations like non-gay-identified men. Online interviews may be a reasonable and feasible means to including these men in future sexuality studies.

9.6. Conclusion

9.6.1. Research Questions and Objectives

As outlined in chapter 3, this study was guided by two central research questions related to an overall interest in the experiences of MSM in using the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes and what insight those experiences can provide for HIV prevention:
(1) How do MSM use the Internet in their sexual lives?

(2) What insight can men’s experiences of using the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes provide for HIV prevention?

The answers to these questions from the study findings are best illustrated by demonstrating how this study met its research objectives, as follows.

(1) Describe how MSM use the Internet for sexual purposes.

Chapter 5 demonstrated the three main ways MSM in this study used the Internet for sexual purposes. While a central use was finding partners online for offline sexual encounters, men also used the Internet for simulated sex (with the goal of self-stimulation). Some men also used the Internet for exploring their sexuality, and learning more about sex between men, and especially how to have safer sex between men. The latter use occurred mostly among men who were new to same-sex relations.

(2) Investigate how men’s use of the Internet for same-sex sexual purposes is situated within their broader social and sexual lives.

Chapter 5 also illustrated how the men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes was situated within their lives more broadly. The men spoke of their Internet use as a “solution” to challenges in their social and sexual lives: (1) resolving tension related to their same-sex interests; (2) overcoming restricted social connections; (3) disenchantment with finding sex offline; and (4) supplementing the sex-seeking experience. In each of these cases, the Internet provided a new avenue for contact with other MSM.

This chapter also proposed a typology of Internet users based on the experiences of the MSM in this sample. This typology showed how the “maturity” of men’s sexual careers could influence their use of the Internet for sexual purposes. For example, men with more mature sexual careers – men with longer histories of sex with men, and participation in gay communities – tended to use the Internet more to improve and/or supplement their sex seeking experiences. On the other hand, men with less mature sexual careers – men new to same-sex relations – used the Internet to acculturate to the gay culture and learn about sex with men. This typology is important because
it demonstrates that a “one size fits all” approach is not appropriate for online HIV prevention efforts, given the diversity of men online, their sexual experiences, and their prevention needs.

(3) Examine the intersections of men’s Internet use for sexual purposes, the contexts of that use, and their management of sexual risk.

This objective was covered in chapters 6 through 8. This objective is the crux of the “structuring contexts” argument presented earlier in this chapter. This study demonstrated how numerous contextual factors – some micro-level, some macro-level – encompassed men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes, and could come to influence their sexual risk management and behaviour. Chapter 6 demonstrated how the process of finding a sexual partner online could be influenced by the broader norms and discourses of the gay community, as well as those of the online subculture itself. Chapter 7 drew specifically upon social risk theory to demonstrate how unprotected sex was related to numerous contextual factors at work in the sexual encounter. Chapter 8 illustrated the existence of an online sex-seeking subculture which also provided a layer of context related to sexual risk management and behaviour. Taken together, these findings demonstrated that both men’s Internet use for sexual purposes and men’s sexual risk could be situated within their respective contexts, providing important insight for the design of responsive HIV prevention.

(4) Investigate men’s views towards online HIV prevention efforts.

This objective was addressed in chapter 8. Discussions in this chapter presented men’s views on the HIV prevention materials they had encountered, what they thought about those materials, and how they thought HIV prevention could be improved. Overall, the men underlined the need for HIV prevention to be resonant with the experiences of MSM; clear and unambiguous; prominent; persistent; and interactive – both online and offline.

Overall, the findings from this study showed how the Internet is much more than “just another place” for MSM to find sexual partners. Instead, the men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes related back to their broader social contexts, and their sexual risk management could be mediated by their use of the Internet in these contexts. The role of the Internet in these men’s lives tended to differ based upon their experience with same-sex relations, drawing attention to the diverse experiences that MSM have online, and their similarly diverse HIV prevention needs.
9.6.2. strengths and limitations of the study

This study has made some key contributions on a number of fronts. First, it is the first study to utilize a structural interactionist and social risk perspective to analyze how men use the Internet in their sexual lives. Second, this is also the first study to specifically consider how sexual risk may develop in Internet-arranged sexual encounters, and to examine how unprotected sex and/or “risky” situations were situated within a broader context—especially among men otherwise committed to having safer sex. From this perspective, this study was able to offer insight into potential HIV prevention avenues which better reflect men’s own experiences in using the Internet for sexual purposes in the broader context of their lives, experiences and interactions. Third, this study provided critical reflection on concepts and processes defined in previous qualitative work, to provide further insight into innovative HIV prevention. Finally, unlike other qualitative research in this area, this study also specifically sampled non-gay-identified men and spoke specifically to the experiences of men new to same-sex relations, and how those differences and their prevention needs may differ from gay-identified men and/or men who were more familiar with same-sex relations.

It must be recognized that the findings in this study are based on one small sample of MSM who reside in the Greater Toronto Area. However, the composition of the sample itself was strong. The stratified sampling strategy was successful in recruiting MSM who varied on numerous dimensions, including age, sexual orientation, use of the Internet for sexual purposes, and sexual safety. In this respect the study represents findings from a cross-section of MSM, albeit still all from the same geographic area and, on the whole, with little racial/ethnic variation. The findings in this study also parallel findings from some of the other qualitative work, suggesting that the results from this study speak to more general trends in men’s use of the Internet in their sexual lives.

While the sample was stratified on numerous fronts, it was not particularly successful in representing the experiences of men from different ethnicities. Regrettably attempts to recruit men from different ethnic backgrounds in this study (e.g., through culturally-specific AIDS service organizations and an ethno-racial MSM research working group) were not terribly successful. This is unfortunate, given suggestions in the literature of the way race and discourse
around race can influence men’s experiences with sex and sexual risk, both online and offline. It would have been ideal to be able to speak to this element in this study.

Difficulties recruiting these men may be related to numerous issues. First, like all qualitative research, especially on sensitive topics like sexuality, accessing some populations can be very difficult. This may be especially true in sexuality research, where studies can experience a double-bind difficulty in managing issues of sensitive topics and cultural issues related to sexuality. Second, along similar lines, the researcher was not affiliated with a community AIDS service organization, so issues of credibility and even language barriers may have been in play. Finally, it was suggested to the researcher that the small amount of the honorarium might have been a barrier to recruiting from some ethnic populations; indeed, the honorarium amount was most likely a barrier to men’s participation regardless of ethnic background.

It was also somewhat surprising that the men in this sample did not have, on the whole, higher-risk sexual behaviour, given findings from previous work which suggested that men who seek sex partners online have higher-risk profiles. Again, as earlier, it is difficult to conjecture as to why these men did not participate in this study. Nonetheless, this study was able to contribute significant findings to understanding how sexual risk behaviour could occur with men who were otherwise committed to safer sex, which is a population who require attention for HIV prevention.

9.6.3. Directions for Future Research

This study has identified numerous directions for future research in this area. One key area is further focus on the Internet and its role in the development of sexuality. The findings in this study suggested a socialization process not only with respect to the offline gay community, but also an online sex seeking subculture. There was also suggestion that men learned about sexual risk and its management through their online interactions. A sustained focus on these processes of socialization and learning about sexual risk are very important to understand more about how the Internet, as a new and somewhat unique means of connecting with other men, may contribute to how men understand sexual risk. It would be particularly important to consider how men learn about “folk knowledges” through this socialization process.
Future research might also focus on the role of the Internet in supporting men during their coming out process. This study illustrated how contextual factors could impact sexual risk management, especially for men who were not as familiar with same-sex relations. Some men new to same-sex relations also expressed confusion about safer sex methods and their efficacy. Further research is needed to understand more completely how men new to same-sex relations use the Internet and how they glean knowledge from that use, both formally and informally.

Along similar lines, future research might focus as this study did on the socially-situated nature of both men’s use of the Internet for sexual purposes and their sexual risk management. More inquiry in this field would help complement and expand the analysis presented here, especially with respect to innovative directions for HIV prevention. Specific focus should be paid to the links between the Internet and contexts that may be disempowering from a sexual negotiation perspective. Future studies might focus specifically on men who have had unprotected sex in sexual encounters arranged online.

Generally speaking, research in this area should move from a focus on gay-identified men to non-gay-identified men and/or men who are new to same-sex relations. This study showed how the experiences of men new to same-sex relations differed quite a bit from men more familiar with the gay community and same-sex relations. Research to date overall has not systematically considered how non-gay-identified men and/or men new(er) to same-sex relations use the Internet for sexual purposes and the specific prevention needs they may have. Future inquiry might also continue recent lines of research into the experiences of men from different ethnicities in using the Internet for sexual purposes.

Finally, related to the socialization argument, there was suggestion in this study that social network approaches to HIV prevention might be a useful avenue to pursue. Future research should consider the potential for translating the successful peer opinion leader prevention models to an online context. The peer-led approach may be useful for conveying safer sexual information in a more informal and credible method. It might also be able to make inroads into combating some of the more structural issues involved in unprotected sex, by attempting to alter norms in both the online and offline gay communities. While this latter point may be a very difficult challenge, it is worth investigating as a means of providing structural level change. A
first step towards this goal would be further research into the socializing function of Internet sex seeking and its influence on sexual risk perception, management and behaviour.

This study has shown that MSM use the Internet for sexual purposes in a variety of ways, and these men have diverse HIV prevention needs. It is imperative that HIV prevention respond to these needs in an effective way, and the socially-situated analysis presented here underlines the need for individual- and structural-level prevention efforts to respond to men’s needs both online and offline.
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## Appendix A: Literature Review Table

### Research on the Use of the Internet for Sexual Purposes among MSM

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<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bull et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Mixed (Youth)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowsett et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>Barebacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grov et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Addiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hooper et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horvath, Oakes, et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Risk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horvath, Rosser, et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM (Youth)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koekenbier et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lau et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Léobon &amp; Frigault</td>
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<td>MSM</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Risk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Levine et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mikolajczak et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mimiaga, Fair, et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimiaga, Tetu, et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ogilvie et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
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<td>Survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhodes et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rietmeijer &amp; McFarlane</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanders</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandstra et al.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balán et al.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>MSM (Latino)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>Barebacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hogben &amp; Niccolai</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Review</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rietmeijer &amp; McFarlane</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Review</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bull et al.</td>
<td>In press</td>
<td>Mixed (Youth)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moskowitz et al.</td>
<td>In press</td>
<td>MSM</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosser, Miner, et al.</td>
<td>In press</td>
<td>MSM (Latino)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Risk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer Text

Guys — do you use the Internet to explore your sexuality? Or have unprotected sex with guys you met online?

Tell us about it!

Why? We want to know more about how guys use the Internet for sexual purposes with other guys – like cybersex or finding sex partners. We need to know more to help better support men in making decisions about sex.

Why should you be included? We want to talk to guys who have sex with other guys, or even guys who haven’t, but have been thinking about it. You can help us understand more about how guys use the Internet for sexual purposes with other men. You don’t need to give your real name, and your anonymity and confidentiality is assured. You can be interviewed online or in person. You will receive a small honorarium for your time.

Who are we? This study is affiliated with the HIV Social, Behavioural and Epidemiological Studies Unit and the Department of Public Health Sciences at University of Toronto. It is partially funded by the Ontario HIV Treatment Network.

Want to participate? If you are over 18, live in the Greater Toronto Area, and you answered “yes” to one of the questions above, contact us to find out more:

MISM (Men, Internet and Sex with Men) Study
416-978-7699
MISM@utoronto.ca
www.hivstudiesunit.ca/MISM
Appendix C: *gay.com* Profile for Study

**Member ID:** mism_study

**Location:** Toronto, Ontario

**Gender:** Male

**Age:** 29

**About Me:**

The Men, Internet and Sex with Men (MISM) Study is looking to interview guys who (1) use the Internet for sexual purposes and/or (2) have unprotected sex with guys they met online. We are particularly interested in talking to guys who identify as bisexual, or guys who have sex with men, but don’t identify as ‘gay’ or ‘bisexual.’

Participation is anonymous and confidential, and you will receive modest compensation for your time.

Message me if you are interested in knowing more.

The study is affiliated with the University of Toronto and is partly funded by the Ontario HIV Treatment Network.
Appendix D: GayGuideToronto.com Advertisement
Appendix E: Revised Interview Schedule

MISM Study Interview Schedule

Interview: _____________________  Mailing List: [ ] Yes [ ] No
Date: _____________________  Contact?: [ ] Yes [ ] No
Admin: _____________________

Demographics

The first questions will ask for some basic information about your background.

1. Birthdate:  Month ___ Year ___

2. Were you born in Canada?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No
   If No, where? _______________________________________
   If no, what YEAR did your arrive/immigrate to Canada?   ______________

3. Which of the following racial/ethnic groups do you best identify with (please choose only one):

| Aboriginal (Inuit, Métis, North American Indian) | Latin American |
| Arab/West Asian (for example, Armenian, Egyptian, Iranian, Lebanese, Moroccan) | South Asian |
| Black (for example, African, Haitian, Jamaican, Somali) | White (Caucasian) |
| Asian (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean) | Other (please specify): |

4. Where do you live? ______________________________________

5. With whom do you live? (Check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>Spouse/partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children (# ____ )</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
6. What is the highest level of education that you have completed? If you completed education outside of Ontario, please select the option which is the best match.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some or completed primary education (Grades 1 – 5)</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>Some or completed middle education (Grades 6 – 8)</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>Some secondary education (Grades 9 – 12/13)</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completed secondary education (Grades 9 – 12/13)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Completed college</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some university</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Some post-graduate</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Other (please specify):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Which of the following best describes your present employment situation? Please choose only one option. If you are a student and you also work, please indicate as well your type of employment as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employed, full-time</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>Employed, part-time</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>Employed, casual (no regularly scheduled hours)</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not presently employed</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Student (without employment)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Student (with employment); please indicate the type of your employment</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. What is your occupation – not where you work but the kind of work you do/did?

________________________________________________________________________


| <$15 000                   | [ ] | $15 000 – 19 999 | [ ] | $20 000 – 29 999 | [ ] |
| $30 000 – 39 999           | [ ] | $40 000 – 49 999 | [ ] | $50 000 – 59 999 | [ ] |
| $60 000 – 69 999           | [ ] | $70 000 – 79 999 | [ ] | $80 000 +        | [ ] |

10. What is the language spoken in your home?

[ ] English Other(s): ________________________

This section will ask you questions about your sexual history and relationship status.

11. How do you describe your sexual orientation?

Gay (Homosexual) [ ] Bisexual [ ] Straight (Heterosexual) [ ]
12. Are you currently in a relationship with a man?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>For how long?</th>
<th>years</th>
<th>months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. Have you had any of the following sexually transmitted infections/diseases in the past 12 months? Please choose all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syphilis</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>Chlamydia</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gonorrhea</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Human papilloma virus (HPV, genital warts)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify):</td>
<td>I did not have a sexually transmitted infection.</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Have you ever had an HIV test?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If YES, in what year were you last tested? _________

15. What was the result of your last HIV test?

| HIV positive | [ ] |
| HIV negative | [ ] |
| Indeterminate | [ ] |

16. How many HIV tests have you ever had? _________

17. Where did you see the study advertised?

18. Have you participating a study like this before?

a. Similar topic

b. Other topic related to sex
Internet and Sex

- How do you use the Internet for sexual purposes?

- How would you describe your use of the Internet for sexual purposes?
  - Frequency
  - Duration
  - **How long online?**

- Why do you go online for these purposes << as above >> ?

- Compare your first time going online for these purposes to your more recent experiences. How have they changed?

Sexual Behaviour

- Where do you find sex partners?
  - Experiences doing so with each

- How would you describe your sexual experience with other guys?
  - Number of partners, types of practices, practice of safe sex

- How would you rate your safer sex knowledge?

- How do you feel about safer sex?

- How does the sexual encounter unfold?
  - How does safer sex happen?

Internet Sex Seeking (if applicable)

- Why did you start looking for sex partners online?

- How did you start looking for sex partners online?

- What is the process for finding sex partners online?
  - System
  - Contact
  - Selection
  - Negotiation
  - Differences between systems?

- What do you **like** about finding sex partners online? What do you **dislike** about it?

- Do your sexual experiences differ if you’ve met a guy online instead of offline?

- Do you think using the Internet for sexual purposes has made you change any of your sexual practices?

- Describe for me a particularly **good** Internet sex-seeking experience. Describe for me a particularly **bad** Internet sex-seeking experience.
• How would you describe the role of the Internet in your sexual life? In your social life?

Social and Sexual Networks Online

• Tell me about the networks you have formed online – either social or sexual

• Explain to me how the networks work
  o How often do you talk, what do you talk about, etc.

• What is your relationship with your online sex partners
  o E.g., do you talk to them other than to arrange a hook-up, etc.?

STI/HIV Prevention

• Tell me about HIV prevention efforts you have seen online.
  o Do they work for you?
  o How have they impacted you?

• Tell me about HIV/STI prevention materials you have seen.
  o Do they work for you?
  o How have they impacted you?

• How do you feel about HIV/STI prevention online?

• What would work for you for HIV/STI prevention?
Appendix F: Letter of Information

(Printed on institutional letterhead)

Dear Participant,

Thanks for your interest in the Men, Internet, and Sex with Men (MISM) study. I am studying how men use the Internet for sexual purposes with other men – like cybersex or finding sex partners. This is important to study because we need to know more about how men’s Internet use might affect their sexual behaviour, to help better support men’s sexual health. I would like to interview you for this study because you’re a man who has used the Internet for a sexual purpose involving another man and you probably have a lot of important experiences to share. I will be interviewing about 40 men in total for this study. I am conducting this study for my doctoral thesis, in the Health and Behavioural Sciences program of the Department of Public Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto. It is also partly funded by the Ontario HIV Treatment Network.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to refuse to participate. Your participation is completely anonymous. If you want to participate, you should know that you can refuse to answer any questions you don’t want to, and you may also withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences. You can choose to be interviewed online, in person, or over the telephone. With your consent, I would like to either save our online interview, or digitally record our in-person or telephone interview. The interview will take approximately 1 to 2 hours to complete.

I will ask you questions about your use of the Internet for sexual purposes and your sexual experiences with other men. You may find some of the questions very personal and sensitive. To ensure your confidentiality, I will never ask you to reveal your real identity. If you don’t do so already, you may want to communicate with me through an anonymous e-mail service (such as Hotmail or Yahoo). No material that could personally identify you will be used when I report the findings of the study.

There are no physical risks to you for taking part in this interview. There are no direct benefits to you either. If the questions I ask raise any personal concerns for you, I can provide you with resources for counseling, HIV testing and safer sex. You will receive a $20.00 cash honorarium for participating in this interview.

This project is not affiliated with any office, clinic or website you may have seen it advertised. This project has been given ethics approval by the Research Ethics Board at University of Toronto. When I have finished the study, I will make the findings available on the study website (www.hivstudiesunit.ca/MISM). I will also make the results available to community agencies, present them at academic conferences and publish them in academic journals.

If you have any questions about the study and/or your participation in it, please contact me. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Ethics Review Office (416-946-3273; ethics.review@utoronto.ca).

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Lombardo, MA, PhD(c)
416-978-7699
MISM@utoronto.ca
www.hivstudiesunit.ca/MISM
Appendix G: Consent Form

In Person Interviews:

(Printed on institutional letterhead)

Consent to Participate

I consent to be interviewed by Anthony Lombardo for the MISM (Men, Internet, and Sex with Men) study, as part of his doctoral research on how men use the Internet for sexual purposes with other men.

I understand that:

- I may refuse to answer any questions I don’t want to.
- I may end the interview at any time.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time, without negative consequences.
- I will not be required to reveal my personal identity.
- My participation in this study is both anonymous and confidential.
- No personally identifying material will be present on the digital recordings, transcripts and/or written notes from my interview.
- Only Anthony Lombardo, the three members of his doctoral supervision committee (as necessary), and a transcriptionist (if needed) will have access to my interview recordings, transcripts and/or written notes.
- There are no physical risks to me in participating in this interview.
- **I will receive a $20.00 cash honorarium for participating in this study. I agree to initial a receipt showing that I have received the honorarium and I understand the receipt will remain in the confidential records of the study.**
- I will give verbal consent to participate in this study. Anthony Lombardo will either digitally record the consent process (if I consent to recording) or log the consent process in a consent log as proof of my consent.

Date:

MISM Study
416-978-7699
MISM@utoronto.ca
www.hivstudiesunit.ca/MISM
Consent to Participate in Online Interview

I consent to be interviewed by Anthony Lombardo for the MISM (Men, Internet, and Sex with Men) study, as part of his doctoral research on how men use the Internet for sexual purposes with other men.

I understand that:

- I may refuse to answer any questions I don’t want to.
- I may end the interview at any time.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time, without negative consequences.
- I will not be required to reveal my personal identity.
- My participation in this study is both anonymous and confidential.
- No personally identifying material will be present in the transcripts and/or written notes from my interview.
- Only Anthony Lombardo and the three members of his doctoral supervision committee (as necessary) will have access to my interview transcripts and/or written notes.
- There are no physical risks to me in participating in this interview.
- I will receive a $20.00 honorarium for participating in this interview, in the form of cash or an electronic gift card from amazon.ca. If I wish to have the cash honorarium, I understand that I can arrange to pick the honorarium up from the Institute for Life Course and Aging at University of Toronto (222 College St., Suite 106, Toronto, Ontario). I agree to initial a receipt showing that I have received the honorarium and I understand the receipt will remain in the confidential records of the study. If I wish to have the electronic gift card, I will provide Anthony Lombardo with a valid e-mail address to send the electronic gift card to. The gift card will not give any indication of my participation in this study, and no information pertaining to the study will be sent to this e-mail address (unless I have authorized Anthony Lombardo to do so).
- I will indicate in the online interview whether or not I give Anthony Lombardo permission to save the transcript of our interview, for analysis.

MISM Study
MISM@utoronto.ca
416-978-7699
www.hivstudiesunit.ca/MISM