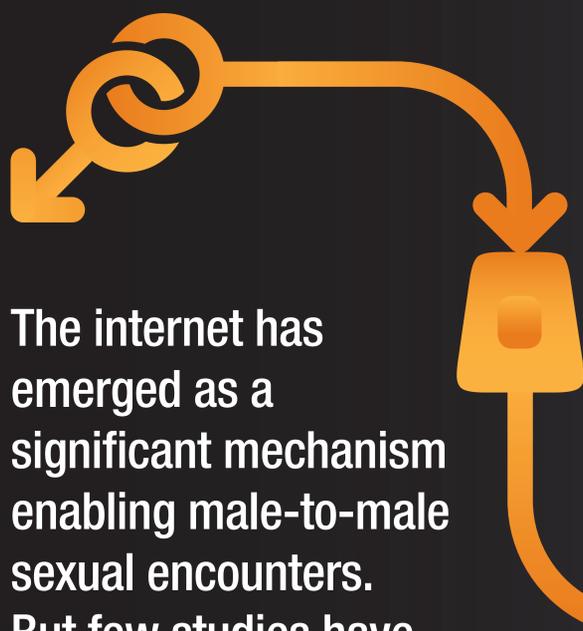SEND WOOF ADD BUDDY EMAIL UNLOCK ADD NOTE BLOCK

FANTASY & PRACTICE:
THE USE OF SEXUAL MEDIA AMONG SYDNEY GAY MEN

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The internet has emerged as a significant mechanism enabling male-to-male sexual encounters.

But few studies have investigated how participation in sexual media is shaping approaches to sexual practice and forms of sexual sociability.

This study treats sexual media as a significant new infrastructure of the sexual encounter. By investigating how people are experiencing and relating to this medium, we gain insight into some of the sociotechnical arrangements through which people encounter and engage with prospective partners - and with HIV.

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About the Study

What are sexual media?

Like social media, sexual media include web-based and mobile technologies that enable dialogue and interaction between subscribers for erotic and/or social purposes. But unlike social media, these media appeal primarily to intentions to construct offline erotic relations. Thus, details such as the location of users are often prominent. While sexual media are generally designed to facilitate offline encounters, some functions are geared to online interaction exclusively, constituting erotic practices in their own right. Rapid access to pornography creates new proximities between representation, consumption and interaction in some forms of engagement.

Researching risk in the sexual media environment

The field tends to be divided between studies that focus on the textual manifestation of risky eroticism (for example studies of barebacking symbolism)[1] and studies of 'actual behaviour' (social and behavioural research). The fetishization of risk uncovered in textual studies is often countered by a sociological and/or epidemiological insistence on the distinction between fantasy and practice. But this insistence, while important, can betray a reluctance to engage with fantasy as a meaningful dimension of practice. Approaching sexual media as embodied and enacted in specific ways is important.

Embedded and continuous

In contrast to early understandings of cyberspace, sexual media can be approached as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces. There are numerous relays between online and offline encounters, which frequently frame and animate each other. To the extent that participants experience sexual media as 'merely virtual', this is something that needs to be socially explained as a practical accomplishment rather than taken as a given.[2] The question is how participants themselves make and enact distinctions between the real and the virtual, fantasy and practice.

Quiet sorting

All-male sexual media invariably index social space, creating an experience of gay presence even in contexts of apparent absence. By investing everyday space with ongoing potential for gay sexual and social encounters, sexual media addresses the normativity of social space in novel ways. Users can stage their online presence to their own advantage, gradually releasing information about appearance and interests to potential partners.[3] Many participants value the capacity to maintain anonymity while selectively releasing significant details such as sexual interests, HIV status, drug use, ethnicity and age.

Some sites prompt details such as HIV status and even viral load, suggesting practices such as serosorting and strategic positioning.[4] Some sites are constructed as 'hotter' and more effective for hook-up purposes than others. One 'barebacking' site formatted to enable serosorting listed over 1200 'HIV-negative' Sydney subscribers, some of whom described participation as exciting but challenging in terms of their desire to maintain HIV-negative status.

Moods of engagement

Participants described different practices of use: browsing, filtering, random chat and background use ("basically like fishing. You put your photo out there and then you hope that someone's gonna try and get your attention"). These were enacted in the context of particular everyday moods - distraction, relieving boredom, fantasizing - in addition to looking for sex. The relative anonymity of the medium affords the opportunity for particular sorts of discourse (e.g. 'anonymous socializing', consisting of sexual talk and picture swapping, and governed by different rules and assumptions than face-to-face interaction). Sexual media were also useful for arranging 'wired play', a particular genre of sexual practice consisting of more focussed searching and browsing, use of drugs such as crystal meth, multiple consecutive encounters, and (for some) group scenes.

Conclusions

Understanding how sexual media is shaping sexual practice involves understanding how it is used, including the affective dimensions of use. Sexual media is engaged in the context and creation of everyday moods, which impact what takes place and how. Sometimes it is valued as a fantasy space, enabling flirting and 'idle chat'. At other times its 'capacity to deliver' is prioritised, and this may affect choice of sites, partner selection, and sorting criteria.

[1] T Dean (2009) Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the subculture of barebacking. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[2] D Miller & D Slater (2000) The Internet: an ethnographic approach. Oxford : Berg.
[3] M Davis, G Hart, G Bolding, L Sherr & J Elford (2006) E-dating, identity and HIV prevention. Sociology of Health and Illness 28 (4): 457 - 478
[4] K Race (2010) Click here for HIV status: Shifting templates of sexual negotiation. Emotion, Space & Society 3 (1): 7 – 14.