PARTY ‘N’ PLAY: ONLINE HOOK-UP DEVICES AND PNP PRACTICES AMONG GAY MEN

The Study

PNP and its correlates – internet use, crystal meth use, sex with multiple partners, use of apps – are largely produced within the HIV epidemiological and behavioural literature as a pathogenic site, because of the associations with substance use and HIV transmission. Little attempt has been made in this literature to approach these behaviours as a culture: – a cluster of activities and practices that are meaningful for participants with their own organising logics and relative coherence, a significant source of pleasure, connection, eroticism and intimacy – notwithstanding the known dangers.

A cultural analysis of PNP may prompt a productive confrontation with one of the central paradoxes of HIV prevention among men who have sex with men: Many of the sites that epidemiologists identify as pathogenic are also key sites for the elaboration of significant social bonds.

Ethinography of Affordances

Ethnographic work was conducted among Sydney and Melbourne gay men: qualitative interviews (n = 30), historical inquiry, participant observation and review of relevant trends in the behavioural data. This included the analysis and description of design features and functions of smartphone apps and web interfaces as these features are used and put into practice. A key concern is to situate digital devices as active elements in the shaping of sexual practices: to trace how digital devices interfere with, transform, or otherwise impact given practices and relations. This approach has both empirical and speculative dimensions: It is concerned not only with what happens, but also what might happen, i.e. what might come into being.

“LOOKING TO PLAY?”

This is one of the most common questions employed to initiate conversation in this medium. In the sociology of Georg Simmel (1949), play is conceived as a non-instrumental form of association in which the exchange of stimulus is the governing principle and in which personally, serious content, and substantive ends are suspended or displaced in favour of cultivating the pleasures of association. To describe sex as play is to dislodge sex from the narrative that emphasizes the mutual development of biographical intimacy, foregrounding a role for sex in the assembly of affective associations that Simmel would term “sociability”.

Co-construction of Fantasies

In digital chat, sexual activities and desires are not only stated but co-constructed in conversational format, either as a prelude to – or irrespective of – a sexual encounter. As a form of play, random chat enables participants to experiment with ideas about what they might want, as well as learn about sexual possibilities and set parameters; constituting a space in which fantasies materialize into more concrete opportunities, desires, and intentions; or else remain in the realm of chat and fantasy. In the online environment, viewing pornography may be interspersed with practices of sexual searching, in an arrangement that produces new relays between pornographic scenes and material practices of arranging sex. Here, sexual desires, intentions and even identities do not precede the online encounter in any simple sense, but can also be understood to emerge from it.

Chem-sex

Crystal methamphetamine is used in this setting to effectuate certain capacities: It enhances sexual sensation, but also keeps users awake and alert, enabling them to maintain the sort of focus and fixation required for browsing online profiles and watching porn for extended periods. GHB is typically used to initiate or reinitiate sexual activities, such that an extended session typically goes through various temporal phases – sex, chilling, chatting, smoking, taking G, sex – which correspond with the high that GHB produces (which can last up to an hour).

Group Play/Extended Sessions

Group play may be approached as the attempted construction of a pornographic “elsewhere”, and this is where the use of drugs often comes in. While the focus of group play is ostensibly sex, such sessions actually comprise a number of activities, including chilling, chatting, watching porn, browsing profiles, and a range of other group and individual activities that usually take place in the homes of participants. Some critics associate online cruising with what they see as a “troubling privatization of intimacy.” But the frequent references to group play suggest that PNP is not an isolated or atomized activity. There is considerable evidence of a will to sexual sociability within this culture.

CONCLUSION

Online hook-up devices are participating in the construction of a specific sphere of sociability and amenable acquaintance among men in urban centres with its own conventions, expectations and typical sequences of activity that prioritizes sex as a principle mechanism for connection and sociability. At a time when marriage and monogamy increasingly monopolize the public discourse of gay desire, online hook-up devices are implicated in much more diffuse sexual arrangements that – while widely accessed – may be difficult to acknowledge publicly. From a health promotion perspective, what matters is the manner in which various different elements come together in these assemblages to generate specific effects (whether good or bad) – and it is this coming together that requires specific attention and vigilance. By paying attention to the pleasures, difficulties, activities and connections that are variously emerging from this space, we are better able to grasp them and engage the social assemblage they are generating.

ABOUT THE PAPER

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PRE-SPECIFICATION OF ATTRIBUTES

One of the new affordances of hook-up devices is the ability to chat textually and relatively anonymously in real time. This differs from longer standing gay sexual environments, such as saunas and beats, where prolonged verbal communication is not necessarily customary prior to sex. For this reason, these devices are implicated in the solicitation and disclosure of various sorts of information, including HIV status, which in turn enables the proliferation of “serosorting” – a practice that plays out in various ways and in the case of HIV-negative serosorting is obviously fallible. Undetectable viral load has recently emerged as a common stated identity in these interactions.

ATRIBUTES

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