Author's response to reviews

Title: Comparison of risk behaviors and socio-cultural profile of men who have sex with men survey respondents recruited via venues and the internet

Authors:

Hi Yi Tsui (hytsui@cuhk.edu.hk)
Joseph T.F. Lau (jlau@cuhk.edu.hk)

Version: 3 Date: 5 February 2010

Author's response to reviews:

In response to Reviewer’s Report 1:

Major compulsory revisions

1) I’m less satisfied with the response to required revision (4) which refers to the issue of differences between study samples due to differences in the data collection procedures. Looking at potential social desirability biases in Table 2, for all 4 items for which a relevant social desirability impact could be expected (buying and selling sex, UAI, history of STD), the internet group reports higher levels of “undesirable behaviors”.

To my perception the argumentation of the authors in this respect is inconsistent: on the one hand they state that “information on HIV status … was not collected … due to the highly sensitive nature of the question” (page 12-13). On the other hand they contend that there “is no indication that underreporting occurred in the venue-recruited respondents”, although face-to-face-questions about buying and selling sex, a history of STD, and of having unprotected anal intercourse may for many MSM also be highly sensitive, and much more so in face-to-face interviews than in anonymous self-administered internet questionnaires.

The other aspects covered in table 2 reflect mostly specific characteristics of the sample sites: higher numbers of sex partners in the venue-based sample reflect the fact that person-to-person-contacts are easier to establish than in the internet; it is easily comprehensible that men recruited from the internet will themselves recruit a higher proportion of their sex partners from the internet as well; the higher levels of alcohol drinking and psychoactive substance use in venue-based participants are easily explained by the impacts of socializing with other men versus sitting alone in front of a computer.

In addition, the higher levels of reported unprotected anal intercourse in the internet sample might at least partly also reflect a higher feasibility of HIV serostatus communication with subsequent HIV serosorting, or a higher proportion of internet recruited participants living with a regular partner with whom unprotected anal intercourse is usually more common than with casual partners.
A: We agreed with the comments of the reviewer. We actually meant “though there is no proof that under-reporting occurred in the venue-based, the possibility of social bias cannot be ruled out”. We are seeing the possibility of social bias as a limitation, instead of contending with it, and sorry for the confusion and the improper wording. Concerning the part of HIV status, we also admitted it as a limitation and tried to explain why we did not collect such data in the first place. This part of the Discussion is now rewritten as follow: “Thirdly, we did not ask about HIV status of the individuals. HIV positive individuals may have higher levels of risk behavior as compared to their HIV negative counterparts. An alternate explanation of our results may hence be due to a higher proportion of HIV positive MSM using the internet to seek sex partners or for sero-sorting. We cannot test this hypothesis with our results and further research is warranted. However, the involved website does not have any special contents catering HIV positive MSM and sero-sorting is unpopular in Hong Kong. HIV positive MSM are also not deferred from seeking partners from gay venues. Therefore, the bias should not be too serious. Fourthly, stronger social desirability bias may occur among venue-recruited participants as compared to internet-recruited participants, who did not need to face an interviewer. Fifthly, it is possible that a higher proportion of internet-recruited participants were living with a regular partner, with whom unprotected anal intercourse is usually more common than with casual partners. There also was a possibility of self-selection bias in the internet-recruited respondents. Finally, biological markers were not collected in this study.” (Page 13 of the revised text).

Minor essential revisions
1) Language: page 10 “The problem of consuming psychoactive substances or alcohol prior to sexual intercourse was also more severe (instead of ‘severer’) …”

A: We changed the text accordingly (Page 10 of the revised text).

2) Page 11 “However, reservations and fear related to disclosing one’s MSM identity might prevent some internet-recruited MSM from visiting gay venues” (in stead of “… might hinder some …MSM to avoid visiting gay venues”).

A: Thanks. We changed the text accordingly (Page 12 of the revised text).

Discretionary revisions
1) Last but not least, I am astonished that the high level of social isolation, particularly reported by the internet group (91% lack family support, 41% having nobody to talk about one’s sexual orientation) is not emphasized more in the discussion and conclusion sections.

On page 11 the authors state that face-to-face and peer education models are less suitable for web based approaches. However, there are examples for person-to-person counseling and for internet prevention approaches using role
A: We discussed about the lack of social support and we now elaborate on these points (see page 12 of the revised text).

In response to Reviewer’s Report 2:

1. The authors have responded to some of the comments but have not addressed the Editors’ note sufficiently. The paper still needs shortening and better attention to copyediting and language. Significantly, although there are some interesting observations, it is not entirely clear what is the significance of the paper.

A: We have revised the text and hope the length is acceptable; it is below 2,800 words.

2. Since there is no rationale for it, I don’t see the value in the multivariate model (Table 4). All the authors state is “Variables showing significant univariate between-group differences were used as candidate variables in a stepwise multivariate logistic regression model discriminating Group I versus Group V respondents.” But why are the controlled results important? How do they add to the basic information already provided in Tables 1 – 3? Removing Table 4 will improve readability of the paper, as the table does not seem to offer any new insight.

A: Table 1-3 only presents univariate analysis. Now we explain in the text: “As the independent variables listed in Tables 1 to 3 were inter-correlated, a summary multivariate model was fitted to identify variables that were independently associated with the mode of recruitment” (Page 6 of the revised text) We prefer to keep Table 4, as it provides the information is that other variables in Table 1-3 had little additional association with the dependent variable after controlling for the significant variables summarized in Table 4.

3. Because of the lack of focus or theoretical orientation, the discussion seems perfunctory, mostly repeating what was reported in the results. The commentary on the results often seem to state the obvious, offering little to the results. As in “It is possible that venue-goers meet many potential sex partners face-to-face in bars and saunas etc. and may end up having sex with some of them eventually, whilst internet-based sex networks are often constructed in a virtual reality.”

A: We admitted that this is an exploratory study and since the topic is not well studied, it is difficult to draft up a theoretical framework.

4. An important study limitation is that the Internet and Venue samples used different questionnaire modalities (face-to-face vs. internet).

A: This has been mentioned as a limitation in the Discussion. In real practice, data obtained from the internet versus gay venues are collected by using different modalities. The questionnaire used in this study is however, an identical
We would like to thank all Reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.