Reviewer’s report

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

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Reviewer: Ulrich Marcus

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

First of all I want to thank for the opportunity to learn about MSM behavioural research in Hong Kong.

The authors conducted a sexual behaviour survey among MSM from Hong Kong, using venue-based and internet-based sampling. They compared the venue-based sample (n=340) with the internet-based sample (n=226) to describe socio-cultural and risk behaviour differences.

The internet has become an increasingly popular space since about the year 2000. People worldwide use the internet for information, communication, and for meeting people who have similar interests. Because of the perceived anonymity of the net and the opportunity to self-organize around common interests, sexual minorities like MSM have been very eager to use it for seeking contact and sexual partners.

Studies in Western Europe and North America have shown that for MSM the internet in these countries has quickly evolved to a very important, if not the predominant place to meet other men. It has partly replaced traditional “gay venues”, but it is also used by men who have not or only rarely visited gay venues before. Thus, the internet could be characterized as an additional, virtual “gay venue”. Like traditional gay venues – bars, discotheques, saunas, bookstores, etc. – different internet websites for MSM can serve very different needs, and thus may attract quite different clients.

In general it has been found, that by internet a broader range of MSM (regarding age, geography – urban-rural, self-definition, risk behaviour) can be sampled than by other sampling methods. Depending on the accessibility of the internet in general and of MSM websites in particular, MSM internet samples tend to represent a MSM population with lower median levels of sexual risk behaviour than venue-based samples. However, in the early phases of internet use by MSM the situation may be different, because subgroups of MSM who are the most sexually active are usually also those who first use the internet. With time websites for MSM will differentiate and there may exist websites for very different subpopulations of MSM like very young men, older MSM, bareback websites,
etc., so that depending on the participating websites and the approach of the researchers very different groups of MM could be recruited on the internet.

The authors report that they have used bars, gay saunas, and one beach as sampling sites for their venue-based sample. It is quite likely that the characteristics of the men who were recruited at these different sites would be different according to the sampling site. The same may be true for the internet as sampling space: depending on the website where survey participants are recruited, the sample characteristics might be quite different.

Specific required revisions

Major Compulsory Revision

1) Referring to Table 1: Do I understand correctly that for the question when HIV infection can be detected via blood test, the answer “one week after infection took place” was rated as appropriate? What kind of test for HIV is usually available to people in Hong Kong? What is the official statement on the length of the “window period” for detection of HIV infection? Even for PCR-based testing a period of only one week seems too short for me. Did participants have the option to vote for an alternative time period or was their only option to rate the statement as appropriate or inappropriate? If so I would suggest excluding this question from analysis.

Minor essential revisions:

2) Some characterization of the websites on which the survey participants were recruited would be useful, particularly since the sample size of the internet sample seems comparatively small. One of the main reasons for researchers who turn to the internet as a recruitment site for MSM convenience samples is the ease to recruit comparatively large numbers of participants within short time periods. The relatively small internet sample size in this case raises questions about a possible sampling bias. I am well aware of the problem to evaluate and address the problem of self-selection in convenience samples, but the possibilities for a self-selection bias in the internet participants should at least be mentioned and discussed in the discussion section, especially because response rates and biases in internet surveys are so difficult to estimate. A short description, how the survey and its purpose were introduced and explained might be helpful in this respect. Since incentives for participants are not mentioned I assume that none were provided. However, if incentives were provided, they should be described.

3) There is no hint in the tables or the text of the manuscript that information on HIV status of the participants was collected. Only a question on HIV testing in the last 12 months is mentioned. Differences in sexual risk behavior between venue-sampled and internet-sampled participants might be influenced not only by different socio-cultural profiles but also by different proportions of HIV positive participants. In Western Europe, North America, and Australia, particularly HIV-positive men often use the internet for partner seeking because the relative anonymity of the internet facilitates HIV status disclosure and HIV serosorting. If the situation in Hong Kong is similar, this could be a possible explanation for
higher rates of UAI and self-reported STD in the internet sample. If information on HIV status was not collected, this possibility should at least be considered in the discussion of the data.

4) Differences between sampling sites could not only be due to differences between participants, but partly also due to differences in the collection of the data: the venue-based sample was interviewed face-to-face by trained interviewers, which may introduce a social desirability bias especially for delicate questions like UAI, commercial sex, and history of STD. The internet sample filled out a self-administered questionnaire. Due to the larger perceived anonymity and confidentiality the social desirability bias in the answers of the internet participants may have been a smaller.

Discretionary Revisions

5) Could you give examples what kind of “other HIV preventions services” are offered for MSM in Hong Kong?

In summary:

A comparison of different sampling methods for convenience samples of MSM is important for the interpretation of respective survey results. A good and detailed description of the sampling methods and survey approaches is needed to compare different samples. Especially the description of the internet survey could be more informative. Some potential confounding factors for the comparison of the samples have not been adequately considered in the discussion of the results.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests