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

Version: 2 Date: 5 October 2009

Reviewer: Ulrich Marcus

Reviewer’s report:

The authors have complied with most of the revisions required in my first reviewer report from March 2nd, 2009. Particularly the required revisions (1), (2), (3), and (5) are satisfactory.

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.

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’) …..”

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

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 models.

**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