Targeting Dis-Identification Strategies With Consumer Communications: the Case of Sexual Health Risk in Men Who Have Covert Sex With Men (Mcsm)

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Targeting Dis-identification Strategies with Consumer Communications: The Case of Sexual Health Risk in Men Who Have Covert Sex with Men (MCSM)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

Research on men who engage in covert sexual activity with other men (MCSM), tends to focus on generalizable similarities across racialised categorisations (Braz et al. 2007). However, research emerging more recently suggests that men engaged in this activity are much more diverse than previously understood and that more in-depth research is required to begin to unpick the nature of their engagement with their behaviour in general and risk in particular (Robinson & Vidal-Ortiz 2013). HIV infections continue to increase worldwide, and challenges are being made to the efficacy of sexual health promotions, suggesting a more nuanced approach to the one-size-fits-all individualised character of much sexual health marketing communications (Lee 2007). To this end, we address the research question of how to target sexual-health related social marketing communications and services to men engaged in covert sexual activity with men (MCSM) through the development of a nuanced understanding of the risk assessment process within this diverse and challenging sub-cultural group.

Conceptualisation and theory development

The conceptualisation of this research intersects two concepts, risk and dis-identification. The literature on MCSM focuses on stigma and denial, and we suggest dis-identification offers a potential new lens on this activity. Dis-identification relates to an effort being made, or strategy employed to achieve distance from a particular identity, context, group or organisation (Devers et al. 2009). This is characteristic of MCSM, who largely do not conflate their sexual behaviour with their sexual identity (Robinson & Vidal-Ortiz 2013) involving active disavowal of non-heterosexual identity groups. Risk is a common theme in research on HIV communications in general. We take a social constructivist approach to risk which involves the formation of a chain between three conceptual objects, the object deemed to pose a risk, a putative harm and a linkage alleging some form of causation between the two, located within multiple and often conflicting discourses of risk (McGuire and Hardy 2013) which might be ambiguous and shifting and within membership of social groups that impact an individual’s perception of risk (Baral et al. 2013). Using a novel intersection of these two concepts we develop a framework which elaborates upon how in the face of this multiplex notion of risk, different dis-identification strategies result in either: the subject not locating themselves within the risk context for HIV infection or; the subject locating themselves within the risk context but with a reduced perception of risk.

Method

Qualitative research methods are not common across this subject group due to access and sensitivity issues, and most of the literature is located within disciplines that focus on making statistical inferences from large datasets. However it has been argued that “this search for generalizable models has come at the expense of understanding unique cultural patterns and social dynamics often found in sub-groups that foster high-risk sexual behaviour” (Barnshaw and Letukas 2010:487). In this study qualitative techniques were employed, both online (utilising chat services) and off line in-depth interviews and ethnographic encounters. The emergence of the internet as a primary site to facilitate the meeting of sexual partners for gay/bisexual men in general, provides a way in to this community (Blackwell 2010). The research engaged people on contact sites using an overt, but pseudonomised identity as a researcher investigating sexual behaviour. Participants were assured complete confidentiality. Through prolonged contact, a general knowledge about the subject and associated practices was acquired over a three year period, as is commensurate with ethnographic approaches designed to understand a sub-culture. The predominant data collection came from key informants recruited who were asked in more depth about their experiences, over longer periods and several contact instances. In total 10 individuals were involved in multiple in-depth interviews, although over 50 individuals engaged in some kind of discussion or data collection activity. Advice over psychosexual and sexual health counselling services was offered.

Main findings

The main findings of the research document various dis-identification strategies MCSM employ that may result in unsafe sexual activity. The categories are summarised as: happenstance; substance-linked; sub-cultural; projection and normalisation. Happenstance dis-identification offers impulse behaviour explanatory narratives; Substance linked dis-identification offers altered mental state explanatory narratives, and sub-cultural dis-identification offers alternative lifestyle explanatory narratives. These three strategies result in reduced perception of personal responsibility, locating the subject’s understanding of their behaviour as outside of the risk context for HIV. Projection and normalisation dis-identification strategies are more planned, and although they locate the subject’s understanding of their behaviour as inside of the risk context for HIV, they interfere with the causal chain leading to high risk assessment. Several suggestions for targeted social marketing interventions are made based on the different strategies employed.

REFERENCES

