

**Use of Craigslist.org to Hook Up:
Age Differences in Sex Requests, HIV
Disclosure and Negotiated Safety among Men-
Seeking-Men**

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Abstract

Data from 984 “men-seeking-men” Craigslist.org postings in five cities were analyzed to assess differences in sexual requests, HIV status disclosure, and negotiated safety between young (18-24 years) and older (25 years and older) men who have sex with men (MSM). Young MSM were less likely than older MSM to post their HIV status or the preferred status of a partner ($p=0.04$), disclose and/or request a partner who was disease and drug free ($p=.01$), and request use of a condom in their posting ($p=0.01$). Interventions aimed at changing the culture and content of postings on Craigslist.org by encouraging HIV status disclosure and condom use preference are warranted, particularly for young MSM.

Keywords

Men who have sex with men (MSM); Online; Craigslist; HIV; Youth

Introduction

For young men who have sex with men (MSM) the Internet is often accessed to answer questions about sexual identity development and health issues (Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2011; Kupiceck, Beyer, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2010; Hooper, Rosser, Horvath, Oakes, & Danilenko, 2008). However, the anonymity of meeting partners online may also be an appealing method for sexual experimentation (Mustanski, Lyones & Garcia, 2011; Garofolo, Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007) and young MSM are increasingly meeting their first sexual partner online (Franssens, Hospers, & Kok, 2010; Balthasar, Jeannin, & Dubois-Arber, 2009; Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2007).

There are substantial differences in the types of Internet sites that MSM use to meet partners. Some Internet sites are membership-based and have multiple purposes including social networking and information dissemination. Popular membership-based sites such as Gay.com, Manhunt.net and Adam4Adam.com, require registration and have profile sections where individuals can select personal and preferred partner characteristics (e.g., age, race, HIV status, condom use preferred). In contrast, online bulletin boards, such as Craigslist.org, do not require a membership, are free, and do not have strict rules about what can be posted. Craigslist.org is used for posting a range of classified ads, but the “men-seeking-men” category is typically used to arrange a sexual “hook up” (Rosenbaum, Daunt, & Jiang, 2013).

While Craigslist.org is commonly used by men seeking sexual encounters with other men in cities across the United States, few studies have explored the content of postings on this electronic bulletin board. Rosenbaum and colleagues found that MSM were more likely than lesbians and heterosexuals to use Craigslist.org to explicitly arrange sexual encounters and MSM frequently requested a discrete encounter (Rosenbaum et al., 2013). A study assessing the men-seeking-men Craigslist.org ads in New York City found that 65% specifically requested oral and/or anal sex and 3% requested unprotected sex (Groves, 2010). Furthermore, a survey of MSM recruited from bathhouses, bars/clubs and on Craigslist.org, found that those recruited from Craigslist.org had the lowest level of condom use during anal sex (Groves, 2012). The ability of Craigslist.org to quickly arrange a sexual encounter without

giving people sufficient time to reflect on their behaviors is thought to be an important risk factor for HIV transmission and acquisition (Rosenbaum et al., 2013). However, to our knowledge no studies have investigated age differences in Craigslist.org postings, despite the recent increase in new HIV infections among young MSM in the United States (CDC, 2012).

To better understand the ways that young MSM use Craigslist.org to meet sexual partners, we conducted a content analysis of the “men-seeking-men” postings on Craigslist.org to determine whether there were differences in sexual requests, HIV status disclosure and negotiated safety between young MSM and older MSM.

Methods

Sample

On Saturday, June 6, 2009, data from 1,075 Craigslist.org “men-seeking-men” ads in five west coast U.S. cities representing a mix of urban and rural populations [Boise, ID (3%), Las Vegas, NV (31%), Phoenix, AZ (29%), Reno, NV (7%) and Sacramento, CA (30%)] were abstracted within 12 hours of posting using a structured instrument. These cities were chosen to inform 2010 HIV prevention planning in Nevada. Age differences were consistent in all sampled cities, so data were combined for this analysis.

Craigslist.org requires that individuals acknowledge that they are at least 18 years of age before posting an ad; 91.5% (N=984) of ads assessed included age and were included in the analysis. This study was approved by the University of Nevada, Reno Institutional Review Board.

Measures / Coding

Craigslist postings do not include a profile with pre-determined categories. Age and location tend to be reported, but other personal and partner information as well as information about the type of sex requested may not be included. To guide the development of a content analysis codebook, the principal investigator and five study team members reviewed “men-seeking-men” ads posted in the five chosen cities for one month (May, 2009) to determine potential content analysis categories. A data abstraction form and codebook were created to capture the posting time, location and the

presence/absence of information related to desired partner characteristics, meeting arrangements, sexual behavior requests, disease status disclosure and safe sex requests.

Coders were trained to use the abstraction form and codebook including the ability to recognize the meaning behind common posting language such as “BJ” to indicate oral sex, “DDF” to indicate disease and drug free. Differences in coding were discussed in research team meetings and the abstraction form and codebook were revised. For the final analysis, data were abstracted on Saturday June 6, 2009.

Analysis

Age and time of posting is typically posted, but it is up to the poster to decide what requests they want to post. Therefore, each posting variable was treated as a dichotomous variable (posted vs. not posted). Chi-square analyses were conducted to assess age differences (18-24 years vs. 25 years and older) in preferred partner characteristics, meeting arrangements, sex requests, HIV status disclosure and negotiated safety; the Fisher’s Exact test was used when cell size was < 5. The age group chosen for young MSM (18-24 years) is consistent with the definition used for young adults by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). All analyses were conducted using SAS (SAS Institute, Cary, NC version 9.3) and all reported p-values are two-sided.

Results

Of the 984 ads that included age, 20.9% were posted by young MSM (18-24 years) and 79.1% were posted by older MSM (25 years or older). There were no age differences in the time that ads were posted; 60.8% were posted during the day (8:00 am – 7:59 pm) and 39.2% were posted during the night/early morning (8:00 pm – 7:59am).

Table 1: Age differences in the characteristics of men-seeking-men Craigslist.org bulletin board posting

	Total n = 984 n (%)	18-24 yrs n = 206 n (%)	>=25 yrs n = 778 n (%)	X²	P
Time of Posting					
Post during day time (8:00 AM - 7:59 PM)	598 (60.77)	120 (58.25)	478 (61.44)	0.69	0.41
Post during night time (8:00 PM – 7:59 AM)	386 (39.23)	86 (41.75)	300 (38.56)		
Desired Partner Characteristics					
<i>Preferred Age of Partner</i>					
Seeking partner of same age	103 (10.47)	25 (12.14)	78 (10.03)	0.77	0.38
Seeking younger partner	100 (10.16)	4 (01.94)	96 (12.34)	^a	<0.001
Seeking older partner	34 (03.46)	12 (05.83)	22 (02.83)	4.39	0.04
<i>Preferred Type of Relationship</i>					
Discreet / Down Low	172 (17.48)	21 (10.19)	151 (19.41)	9.59	<.01
No strings attached	56 (05.69)	3 (01.46)	53 (06.81)	^a	<.01
Relationship / Boyfriend	6 (00.61)	1 (00.49)	5 (00.64)	^a	0.98
Meeting Arrangements					
Willing to host	228 (23.17)	26 (12.62)	202 (25.96)	16.29	<0.001
Coming to town	56 (05.69)	9 (04.37)	47 (06.04)	0.85	0.36
Meet at hotel	72 (07.32)	10 (04.85)	62 (07.97)	2.33	0.13
Meet at House	14 (01.42)	6 (02.91)	8 (01.03)	4.12	0.04
Meet other location ^b	21 (02.13)	6 (02.91)	15 (01.93)	0.7600	0.38
Sexual Behavior Request					
Anal sex	343 (34.86)	67 (32.52)	276 (35.48)	0.62	0.43
Oral sex	483 (49.09)	68 (33.01)	415 (53.34)	26.94	<0.001
Hand job	85 (08.64)	19 (09.22)	66 (08.48)	0.11	0.74
Rough sex / S&M	29 (02.95)	4 (01.94)	25 (03.21)	^a	0.49
Group sex (3+ partners)	71 (07.22)	11 (05.34)	60 (07.71)	1.37	0.24
Drugs with sex / Party & Play	64 (06.50)	14 (06.80)	50 (06.43)	0.04	0.85
Rimming	59 (06.00)	4 (01.94)	55 (07.07)	^a	<.01
Sex wanted as soon as possible	244 (24.80)	53 (25.73)	191 (24.55)	0.12	0.73
Sexually explicit photo attached to posting	259 (26.32)	49 (23.79)	210 (26.99)	0.86	0.35
Disease Status and Safe Sex Request					
Personal HIV status and/or preferred HIV status	76 (07.72)	9 (04.37)	67 (08.61)	4.1100	0.04
Disease or drug free (personally or prefer in partner)	316 (32.11)	50 (24.27)	266 (34.19)	7.35	<.01
Request sex with condom	85 (08.64)	9 (04.37)	76 (09.77)	6.02	0.01
Request sex without condom	15 (01.52)	2 (00.97)	13 (01.67)	^a	0.75

a Fishers Exact Test used due to small cell size

b Other=bathroom, park, bar, club, sex club, gym, car

NOTE: Column percents indicate that a characteristic or request was posted (yes) versus not posted (not shown) for all characteristics except time of posting. Therefore, column percents will not add up to 100.

Desired Partner Characteristics

Overall, 10.5% of posters indicated that they were seeking a partner of the same age, 10.2% were seeking a younger partner, and 3.5% an older partner. Young posters were more likely to state that they were seeking an older partner (5.8% vs. 2.8%; $p=.04$), while older posters were more likely to be seeking a younger partner (12.3% vs. 1.9%; $p<.001$). Almost one fifth of posters (17.5%) reported that they were looking for a “discreet” or “down low” encounter and 5.7% wanted “no strings attached.” Very few posters (.61%) were looking for a relationship. Older posters were more likely to state that they were looking for a “discreet” or “down low” encounter (19.4% vs. 10.1%; $p<.01$) with no strings attached (6.8% vs. 1.5%; $p<.01$) (Table 1).

Meeting Arrangements

Almost one quarter (23.2%) of posters stated that they were “willing to host” and this was more common among older posters compared to young posters (26.0% vs. 12.6%; $p<.001$). Almost 6% of posters were coming to town and arranging a meeting prior to arrival. The most frequently mentioned meeting locations included: hotels (7.3%) and homes (1.4%). Young MSM were more likely to suggest meeting at a house (2.9% vs. 1.0%; $p=.04$) (Table 1).

Sexual Behavior Request

Over one third (34.9%) of posters requested anal sex and almost half (49.1%) requested oral sex. Less frequently requested types of sex included: hand jobs (8.6%), group sex (7.2%), drug use with sex or “Party and Play” (6.5%), rimming (6.0%), and rough sex (3.0%). One quarter of posters requested sex “as soon as possible” and 26.3% attached a sexually explicit photo to their posting. The only age difference was older MSM being more likely to request oral sex (53.3% vs. 33.0%; $p<.001$) or “rimming” (7.1% vs. 1.9%; $p<.01$) (Table 1).

Disease Status Disclosure and Safe Sex Requests

Few posters specifically disclosed their HIV status or the preferred HIV status of a partner (7.7%). More commonly, men disclosed being disease/drug free and/or requested a

partner who was disease/drug free (32.1%). Overall, 8.6% requested sex with a condom and 1.5% requested sex without a condom.

Young MSM were less likely than older MSM to post their HIV status or the preferred status of a partner (4.4% vs. 8.6%, $p=0.04$), disclose and/or request a partner who was disease and drug free (24.3% vs. 34.2%, $p=.01$), and request use of a condom in their posting (4.4% vs. 9.8%; $p=0.01$) (Table 1).

Discussion

Supporting previous research (Groves, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2013), we found that explicit sexual requests were frequently posted on the “men-seeking-men” bulletin board, but few posters disclosed their HIV status or requested use of condoms during sex. While we did not find many age differences in the types of sex or urgency of sex requests, HIV status disclosure and safe sex requests were less commonly posted by young MSM. The age differential in desired partners coupled with less HIV disclosure and fewer requests for condom use may put young MSM at greater risk for HIV/STI acquisition (Sowell & Phillips, 2010; Service & Blower, 1995).

There is an urgent need to reach MSM using Craigslist.org to arrange sexual encounters with age-specific interventions. Following a syphilis outbreak among MSM in San Francisco associated with meeting partners online (Klausner, Wolf, Fischer-Ponce, Zolt, & Katz, 2000), Craigslist.org agreed to add a warning on their site and a link to the San Francisco City Clinic message board (Klausner, Kent, Wong, McCright, & Katz, 2005). While such changes are encouraging, approximately one third of MSM living with HIV are not aware of their status (CDC, 2013) highlighting the need for links to local HIV/STI resources such as testing locations on Craigslist.org. In addition, interventions aimed at changing the culture and content of postings by encouraging HIV/STI status disclosure and condom use preference are warranted, particularly for young MSM. If a preference for condom use is mentioned in the ad, it may be easier for young men to negotiate safer sex when the “hook up” occurs.

This study has several limitations. First, the culture of internet posting changes quickly and the results of our analyses may not reflect current posting behaviors. Second, because individual posters chose what to post, desired behaviors may have been over- or under-

reported; a content analysis of message board postings cannot be used to estimate prevalence of sexual risk taking. Third, the limited sample size for many variables prohibited multivariate analyses. Finally, while all data were abstracted on one day, it is possible that some ads were missed if the poster deleted the ad before data were abstracted and posting behaviors and norms can change over time.

Despite these limitations, our results demonstrate that Craigslist.org is used for MSM seeking immediate sexual encounters and the content of the postings suggests a community norm, particularly among young MSM, that does not support discussion of HIV/STI status or condom use. Encouraging the negotiation of safer sex and disclosure of HIV status in ads posted on bulletin boards such as Craigslist.org should be included in online HIV/STI prevention efforts for young MSM.

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