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Virtual Risk: How Msm And Tw In India Use Media For Partner Selection

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Title: Virtual Risk: How MSM and TW in India Use Media for Partner Selection

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ABSTRACT

In India, criminalization of adult consensual same-sex relationships and sexual encounters along with stigma toward men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women (TW) may impact the use of social media to help MSM and TW connect to their community and find sexual partners. Through 30 individual qualitative interviews with MSM, TW, and key informants, we sought to understand how social media shape how MSM and TW connect to their community, meet men for relationships and sex, and how use of social media influences sexual risk. Qualitative data were transcribed, translated, coded, and analyzed using grounded theory. Results show that social media usage, which is increasing among all education and income levels, allow MSM and TW to find partners quickly, conveniently, and in larger numbers than traditional (non-social media) methods. Themes included issues of privacy, identity formation, expanding community, and emerging safety concerns and risk behaviors. Concerns about privacy and the ability to control what information are shared is shaped by a stigmatizing environment and an unsupportive legal system. Findings suggest that in order to comprehensively address HIV prevention, current interventions targeting sexual risk behaviors must address social media behavior.

Key words: Social Media, MSM, Transgender women, India, HIV interventions

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The utilization of social media to find sexual partners is an emerging phenomenon in gay communities around the globe (Lorimer et.al, 2016). The unique social and structural context around men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women (TW) in India may have implications for the ways that social media are employed and the subsequent implications for HIV risk. However, to date, little research has been done about how MSM and TW engage with social media. This paper seeks to fill a gap in research and understand the meaning given to and the current uses of social media, within this specific legal, social and political context and the implications of social media use for sexual health.

Social media use is highly prevalent in urban India with 66 million people or 74% of Internet users accessing and using social media in 2012 (Rai, 2013). Additionally, young men represent the demographic of the Indian population with the highest proportion of social media usage at 84% (Rai, 2013). Quantitative research done specifically on MSM cell phone use has found that a large proportion of MSM who participate in sexual risk behaviors in India also use cell phones and the Internet to seek partners (Shanmugam, 2013). Similarly, a qualitative report done in 2007 focusing on the MSM and TW population in Mumbai articulated that some MSM and TW were using cellphones and Internet for finding partners (Chakrapani et al., 2007). However, thus far, no studies have captured in detail the roles that social media (apps and websites) currently have in creating and sustaining sexual networks for MSM and TW in India.

Ongoing stigma among MSM and HIV, the change in legalization of MSM-related risk behavior, and the rise of social technologies in India may have shaped the way social media is used in this setting and drastically changed the way MSM interact, meet people, and engage in sexual risk. A notable barrier to destigmatizing the MSM population in Chennai is Section 377 of the penal code, a section which criminalizes homosexual sex. Although in 2010 the Delhi High Court reversed most of section 377 in 2010, in 2013 the Supreme Court of India reversed this order and effectively recriminalized the issue (Civil Appeal no.10972 of 2013). Thus, in just a few years, MSM in India saw their rights progress and then regress adding additional complexity to the HIV epidemic. The current lack of a legal system defending homosexual sex, HIV testing, and treatment may impact subsequent sexual risk behavior and partner selection. Additionally, addressing sexual-risk behaviors in a legally unsupportive environment may create hurdles to interventions, preventative services, and treatment.

Social media could provide an avenue by which to reach these traditionally hidden populations. In addition to stigma, a lack of gay identity makes it difficult to reach MSM and transgender populations in India (Chakrapani et al., 2002). Identities are based on both sexual preference and gender expression (Chakrapani et al., 2007). The identities explored in this paper are: Kothis, Panthis, Gay or Bisexual, Double-Deckers, and Transgender women. Kothis are most frequently defined as men who engage in mainly anal-receptive sex and display more feminine gender identity, whereas Panthis, who are often called “real men”, partake in anal-insertive sex and are often identified by their partner (Khan, 2004). Double-deckers partake in both insertive and receptive anal sex. Though these subgroups do interact, they have historically remained separated and segregated (Khan, 1999).

In addition to stigma surrounding these MSM identities, HIV stigma is common in India. In one study, an overwhelming majority (90%) of people harbored hostile views of people with HIV (Ambati and Ambati, 1997). These views encompassed ideas such as HIV-positive people deserve their fate and HIV-positive people should kill themselves. Individuals who identify with MSM behaviors and are HIV-positive face a burden of double discrimination that often leads them to choose one identity and ignore the other (Bharat, 2001). Male-to-Female transgender people (Thirunangai) are also burdened with overlapping stigma associated with multiple identities and a disproportionate burden of HIV (Chakrapani, 2014).

The understanding of how and why social media is being used in MSM and TW populations in India can have important implications for future intervention work and HIV prevention. India has the third largest HIV epidemic in the world, with 2.1 million people living with HIV in 2013 (UNAIDS, 2013). Despite decreases in global HIV incidence during the past decade, new HIV infections have been increasing for MSM in Asia (Van Griensven and de Lind van Wijngaarden, 2010). HIV prevalence among MSM is more than 15 times greater than the general prevalence (4.4%), and among other sexual minorities such as TW it is more than 30 times (8.8%) greater than the general population (National AIDS Control Organisation, 2013).

In this paper, we draw on semi-structured interviews with MSM and TW in India in order to examine the role of social media in the social and sexual lives of these populations... by illuminating the dynamics of virtual interaction, exploring new and pertinent definitions of risk behaviors, and offering suggestions for access points for public health interventions this analysis....[add something about implications for HIV prevention, perhaps].

METHODS

Between May 2015 and July 2015, we recruited participants and conducted 26 in-depth interviews with MSM/transgender women and four key informant interviews with community leaders in Chennai, India. Participants were recruited via venue-based sampling from two community-based organizations that provide services to MSM and transgender women. Eligibility criteria included: (1) Identifying as either MSM or TW, (2) being between the ages of 18 and 35, and (3) recently using social media. We stratified our sample according to self-described identity such that we had approximately equal numbers of kothis, gays, bisexual men, double-deckers, panthis, and TW. Further, we stratified our sample such that half of our participants had or currently were engaged in sex work. Two research assistants conducted the interviews. Interviews were conducted in Tamil.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of questions around three main areas or domains: (1) how participants use social media to form sexual and social networks, (2) what types of social media are most commonly used with the individual and their peer group and what they use each platform for, and (3) what health information participants currently receive online and what types of information would they like to receive through social media. Interviews lasted approximately 25-30 minutes, not including a basic demographic survey that was administered at the start of the interview. This demographic survey included age, gender and sexual identity, marital status, and other basic information. Participants were paid INR 550 (about 8 USD). Procedures for interviews were approved by both the Institutional Review Boards of Yale University Institutional Review Board and the Centre for Sexuality Health Research and Policy (C-SHaRP).

PARTICIPANTS

We interviewed three kothis [feminine/receptive], five gay men, three bisexual men, four double-deckers [insertive/receptive], five panthis [masculine/insertive], four TW, and four key informants. Of these participants 6 lived alone (23%), 15 (58%) lived with parents/family, and 5 (19%) with friends.

The demographic characteristics of the participants are displayed in Table 1. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 35 with the average age being 25.6 (stdev 3.7years) and the mean monthly income was INR 11,700 (USD \$172).

Table 1. Demographics

Gender/Sexual Identity		
	Bisexual men	4 (15%)
	Gay men	5 (19%)
	Kothis (feminine/receptive)	3 (12%)
	Panthis (masculine/insertive)	5 (19%)
	Double-Deckers	4 (15%)
	Transgender Women	5 (19%)
Education		
	Less than 12 th grade	5 (19%)
	12 th grade or more	21 (81%)
Employment		
	Any employment	20 (77%)
	Unemployed	6 (23%)
	Any sex work in the past or present	13 (50%)
Social Media Use		
	WhatsApp	26 (100%)
	Facebook	25 (96%)
	Planet Romeo	20 (77%)
	Grindr	9 (34%)

DATA ANALYSIS

For interviews conducted in Tamil, transcripts were transcribed and translated into English. A random selection of interviews was re-translated for consistency. Utilizing techniques from grounded theory, research assistants analyzed interviews and looked for common themes. Analysts developed a coding tree based on initial coding of a sample of eight interviews. The coding tree was discussed with research team and was it validated against additional transcripts and iteratively refined as additional interviews were coded. Once the coding tree/structure was finalized, two analysts independently coded all transcripts using NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software. An a priori coder agreement of 90% was reached and discrepancies between coders were discussed and reconciled.

RESULTS

Themes explored in this research include privacy, identity, expanding communities, emerging concerns and risk behaviors, and rules for maintaining safety throughout the process of partner selection. Privacy explores both why maintenance of privacy is important and how participants utilize social media in a way that retains privacy. The theme of identity explores the ways in which participants are empowered through social media utilization to express multiple

dimensions of their own identity. With expression of one's own identity comes a related theme of participation in new communities and the expansion of social networks.

PRIVACY

Social media has offered MSM and TW a way to select sexual partners while also keeping sexual identity private. The ability of social media to maintain both anonymity about one's own sexual identity and to create a virtual space that is not dependent on physically revealing oneself to the public was elucidated by participants as a great benefit of using social media platforms. For example, one participant notes,

"Real advantage of not showing their real face and you know privacy [is] maintained." (GAY, 28)

In any given interaction, privacy can be maintained by all people, or by just one:

"He might know me, he might not know me, but the advantage is that I don't know that person." (GAY, 28)

One participant framed the benefit of maintaining anonymity to the outside world by contrasting social media partner selection to meeting partners in person:

"If we stand in cruising point the public thinks bad about us. It will be better to do through social media like Facebook." (TRANSGENDER, 30)

This quote suggests a clear hierarchy exists that places meeting new sexual partners through social media as the "better" option as opposed to meeting in traditional cruising sites. This hierarchy appears to exist even with a historical context in which social media was unavailable and physical meeting places were the only way for MSM and TW to find partners. These historical or traditional means of partner selection, often leads to worry and fear of being judged or discovered as a MSM or TW.

"In Chennai pick up from cruising point is somewhat...because if we go there itself the thought that people may find out." (DOUBLE DECKER, 35)

Especially appealing is the ability to reveal sexual preferences without attaching a name or face to it. This once again emphasizes the importance of privacy in the partner selection process.

"I don't have my name in it. I have uploaded with flower. My photo will not be there it will be blank only. I have uploaded profile with flower. Otherwise I upload my likes that I am 35, no body hair, expect others should be good looking, and I will other thing too." (DOUBLE DECKER, 35)

This anonymity was described as particularly salient in the context of an unsupportive legal system, MSM and Transgender women often fear discovery by the police as well as the general public.

"Why are you standing? Why? Police will say, you should not stand here at during this time..." (GAY, 24)

Thus the advent and accessibility of social media technologies coupled with context of stigma for participating publicly in partner selection suggests a transformation in the way MSM and TW meet future sexual partners. In order to avoid potentially stigmatizing situations and an unsupportive legal system, many MSM and transgender women utilize social media for partner selection.

"There is definitely a change. There is no need to roam or wait anywhere. It feels like something when someone sees us. That is not there. We have mobile with us. We can chat and pick up." (GAY, 26)

By creating a venue for the expression of sexual identity, MSM and TW can effectively avoid situations in which their sexual identity would more likely be a target of [enacted]stigma. The utilization of social media to avoid of stigma is salient both when interacting with people outside the MSM and transgender community, but also when interacting within the community. One participant describes how he started talking with a TW through social media despite everyone telling him not to interact with her.

“Actually, everybody tells not to talk with them and all. I just thought I can be friendly with them. Once they came to dress shop and there I spoke with them and when I asked them for number they gave me and also they told me that they are on WhatsApp. That's how we started talking.” (PANTHI, 20)

For this participant, social media offered a private venue in which to interact with a new person. Participants found privacy through social media by creating separate, distinct, and hidden places for their MSM and transgender identities. Participants used many different social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Planet Romeo, and Grindr. Often this was done through the use of multiple phone numbers and profiles that interact with different spheres of their life.

“I have 2 numbers, one is for my home, relation and common and friends’ circle purpose and other number is for fun, enjoyment and entertainment. Using 2 SIMs. Use different caller tunes for 2 SIMs. Based on caller tune will identify that from which SIM so according to that I will talk.” (GAY, 22).

This participant described how he utilized three distinct profiles to interact with different groups of people.

“I have 3 profiles in Facebook. One for family members so college friends are there. Other one is for office colleagues and common friends.” (BISEXUAL, 30)

By creating multiple profiles, groups, and phone numbers participants were able to maintain anonymity during partner selection which allowed participants to avoid stigmatizing situations. Participants were also able to maintain privacy between the different spheres of their lives.

IDENTITY

Another theme that emerged was around the space social media creates where participants are enabled to reveal their sexuality. This was especially important as many participants noted without social media there would be no societal outlet for this type of expression.

“I want to establish my sensations/feelings and want to fulfill my needs; there is no situation in society to express openly my desires...those can't tell their identity still they are hidden so Facebook makes a path for that.” (KOTHI, 27)

There are several ways in which social media platforms create space for identity expression. The creation of a social media profile, enables participants to portray their identity in ways that assist them in finding potential partners.

“In all the sites. In Planet Romeo, Facebook, there will be an option like Gay or normal. If we are Gay, we can select the Gay option. After selecting, and putting nude photos or chatting vulgarly, we can easily identify if they are also like us.” (GAY, 26)

The ability to express sexual desires while maintaining some anonymity, a key characteristic of many social media platforms, enables participants to more easily find sexual partners.

One participant describes how his profile reveals important information about himself without revealing his identity.

“I have written my profile in a very, I’ve just written the things that I like I mean spiritualism, yoga, this this. I did not describe anything and I left it for the other persons you know creativity to think and interpret and then ask me so, I love being very creative so and this person happened to ...my ID is the Angel of Sodom- it’s quite- only people who know the story the biblical story would actually know what the meaning is- so he happened to know that also and that’s when the conversation started.” (GAY, 28)

These quotes illustrate how participants are able to both hide details about themselves while at the same time express especially salient aspects of their identity. The desire to keep key identifiers private is largely shaped by the realities of the criminal system to which even social media may not be immune. One participant describes how his fear of the criminal system is present even when using social media platforms.

“Suddenly if problem comes and if gay people uploaded their original and if they ask to arrest everyone... law will change any time.” (Double-Decker, 35)

EXPANDING COMMUNITY

In addition to finding partners, the ability to express identity also contributes to the formation of community. One participant described how social media introduced him to a community that combined both his religious and sexual identity; identities that he had previously seen as conflicting.

“It has offered a safe space for me as a gay man and initially because I come from a very orthodox Catholic family. So it’s you know ...and my mum is a ...she’s no more...but she was a Pentecostal Christian so there’s this...I went through a lot of mental depression when I grew up as a gay Christian kid and it was not easy, trust me it was not easy and these forums gave me an... opportunity to meet with other gay Christian men.” (GAY, 28)

Another participant described how Facebook has expanded his gay community:

“I know this life [gay life] only through Face Book. Otherwise I wouldn’t have known about this.” (GAY, 25)

Participating in these communities through social media, and the emphasis on maintaining separate venues for different communities, is partly shaped by the legal context of MSM and transgender rights. One participant when acknowledging the legal barriers to being openly LGBT, spoke about how social media groups have empowered MSM and transgender women to come out.

“I think regardless of whether section 377 makes gay or bisexual or LGBT community criminal people are very aware and are very brave and bold because of the community groups like Chennai Dost who has come out and open and made people they gave them the confidence for people who were in the closet and made them to come out of their closet....many groups have evolved and these are the groups which are giving confidence you don’t have to be in fear, you are not doing a crime, it’s your right, having sex is your right, between four walls you can have sex with a man, woman, whatever it is, it’s your right.” (TRANSGENDER, 25)

These communities, facilitated by social media, have several clear benefits compared to in person interactions. For example, language, which can often be a barrier to accessing services

especially in a country like India with so many different local languages, is becoming less of an issue:

“Now there are many sites came in Tamil for example Facebook, then regional languages have come.” (TRANSGENDER, 28)

Other boundaries such as education, location, and time that would normally impact the formation of a community are also less of an issue when using social media. The prevalence of smart phones and internet access transcends education level and social class.

“Everyone has WhatsApp. There is nothing like educated and uneducated. Everyone has it.” (GAY, 26)

Not only do participants meet and interact with people from different educational and class backgrounds, but they are also able to interact with people located all over the world. The geographically unrestrictive nature of social media contributes to expanding social and sexual networks.

“It includes people from everywhere. Planet Romeo connects worldwide.” (DOUBLE DECKER, 32)

In addition to being able to meet anyone from anywhere in the world, participants also articulated how social media was not restricted by time, thereby making connections with others possible at all times of the day and night.

“I will always be in WhatsApp. The mobile will be with me even in the office. I will be in WhatsApp for 24 hours. And Facebook, during the free time in the evening. I use Planet Romeo when am in bed for some time during the night. I use it daily.” (GAY, 26)

One participant describes the ease and instantaneous nature of informing peers about their lives:

“Even if I sneeze we can tell/ inform in WhatsApp.” (TRANSGENDER, 29)

Though social media can expand communities and create an easy path for interaction, it can also create boundaries. The use of multiple forms of media and different “groups” within each platform, facilitated engaged communities while at the same time maintaining boundaries between communities. Participants could choose between web-based or app-based social media depending on their needs and often times utilized multiple different platforms. Though all participants were involved in multiple communities there was little overlap between different communities. As one participant explained,

“Ya for film festival we have a group and for gay community we have a straight group everything has a group now, for transgenders I have a group. So we have groups for everything. I: Different groups for different friends? Do people ever overlap- are in multiple groups of the same groups with you? P: No no no...” (TRANSGENDER, 25)

EMERGING SAFETY CONCERNS and RISK BEHAVIORS

The advent of social media has contributed to an expanding MSM and transgender community and new methods for partner selection located in virtual space. The expansion of both community and opportunities for partner selection has created a set of unique safety concerns and risk behaviors. Major safety concerns revolved around the potential for a breach in privacy and the selection of a partner who would rob or physical abuse the participant. Though privacy is a real advantage of social media use, there are also challenges with maintaining anonymity in a

virtual space. For example, tagging, a function that allows other people to mention your name in a comment, creates venue for non-consensual disclosure of identity.

“He puts on his wall you know whiskey and sex and he says feeling good and then he tags you...you know you have this option of who you were with so you get your name goes there and that’s very annoying. Because you were not a part of the...it’s not like you’ll announce that you just had sex with someone and um this tag.” (GAY, 28).

The fear of nonconsensual posting was also a present for this participant:

“That our private issues will be leaked...or if someone might take video of us doing and publish it.” (BISEXUAL, 25)

Nonconsensual posting was often coupled with a fear of being blackmailed by a partner met through social media. One participant articulated a blackmail practice that he had heard done many times before to married men who sought extramarital relations with other men.

“I will send these pictures to your wife in WhatsApp, I will send in Facebook or I will post this in Youtube. sometimes they demand for money like 50,000 or even a lakh.” (DOUBLE-DECKER, 32)

Concerns about safety throughout the partner selection process were salient for all participants. Though many participants had not personally experienced abuse as a result of a social media encounter, many had at least one story to tell about a friend who had been robbed, blackmailed, or beaten by someone met through social media.

“They invite to a room suddenly like somebody opens the door and starts beating and grabbing everything.” (DOUBLE-DECKER, 35)

Often times, bad experiences were characterized by the experience of both physical abuse and blackmailing.

“And they locked the door and they’ll hit him, and they’ll take nude pictures of him, and they’ll blackmail him, and they’ll ask him to draw the cash from his account and get his gold chain, watch, wallet, or whatever cash he has they’ll get everything from him. It happened once.” (TRANSGENDER, 25)

The use of social media for partner selection has also created a new set of concerns regarding sexual risk with implications for HIV and STI transmission. This is partly because the act of partner selection, whether virtual or physical, involves many opportunities for sexual risk behaviors, but also because of the articulated benefits of social media itself. For example, though sex work can and does occur outside the realm of social media, social media is being used often to participate in sex work.

“They are not able to work in the office for 10000 rupees salary, their cash requirements are more and they are a bit greedy. Many like to do sex work and they aren’t forced to, even if they get a job they are not satisfied as they get a lot of money in sex work.” (TRANSGENDER, 30)

Social media not only helps existing sex workers gain clients, but also introduces new MSM and TW to the world of sex work.

“you see many people use it for sex work only, after we put the photos they will see it and call us, I started my sex work there only and I didn’t like it but I did it during that time as I didn’t have a job.” (TRANSGENDER, 30)

Thus, MSM and transgender women can and do utilize social media to participate in sex work. In addition to sex work, other sexual risk behaviors are also facilitated through social media use.

For example, one participant describes using social media to organize a “gang bang”- an event that involves group sex.

“So I will, to socialize I can call all my friends on WhatsApp or send out mass Facebook message inviting them home and even if it’s a gang bang or group sex thing so that is possible.” (GAY, 28)

Perhaps the biggest contribution social media is making to sexual risk behavior is the ease of finding new sexual partners quickly.

“Because the world is very big. There are so many things to for me to enjoy. I have to finish everything in a short period... So have to go next by next immediately.” (DOUBLE-DECKER, 35)

RULES FOR SAFETY

The virtual realm offers many different platforms and means for interactions to occur. The interplay between text, voice, pictures, video messaging, and transitions between platforms to in person meetings create complex definitions of risky behavior for each participant. For example, though participants did not trust potential partners with “fake” profile pictures, many did not give their photo upfront. Often there are unspoken rules that dictate actions to avoid breeches in safety. The most straightforward rule addresses the risk of being exposed as gay:

“I cannot tell straight people that there is something like this for the Gays. It can be used only by the Gay people.” (GAY, 26)

Many rules address a timeline and social etiquette with a potential partner. These timelines and etiquette are seen in conversations in social media and are used to maintain safety when transitioning from the virtual realm to in-person:

“After chatting for two ...three days we will meet after knowing their character. If we meet directly, there will be problems.” (DOUBLE DECKER, 25)

When describing the content of conversations with potential partners, participants emphasized a balance between shallow pleasantries and deeper details:

“Hey, Hi” you know and that’s how it started and he said “What are you doing?” all the regular you know how it goes right and this and that. And it was not a very shallow conversation, but it was not a meaningful conversation either. So and then he said “would you like to meet up.” (GAY, 28)

Rules are used after the transition from virtual to physical meeting and in person meetings can still impact whether or not sexual relations occur

“Now you take online. Do you decide online whether to have sex or only after meeting? P: No, only after meeting only we will decide. Few might like, few might not. So, after seeing directly only we decide...that we like or not or to have sex.” (DOUBLE DECKER, 25)

Many participants emphasized the need to chat with a potential partner thoroughly.

“We will chat for a few days, for one or two weeks. We will thoroughly check their likes, where they are. After that, we will meet casually one day. We will meet outside generally. And then if the person is OK and if there is no doubt on them, we will go for rooms and hotels.” (GAY, 26)

This chatting process and eventual transition to a sexual encounter emphasizes the multiple steps participants take in order to feel safer with a new partner.

“That’s what, for few days, chat thoroughly for 10-15 days and then ask them to come to a normal place outside and meet them and after that we can take them to

somewhere private or take them to house. That will be safe.” ... “No, that is for my safety. I am only like that. I don’t know how others use. That is for my safety. After knowing a person well and after having fun with them.” (GAY, 26)

In addition to conversations and in person meetings, the sharing of photographs serves a very important purpose in partner selection. Though privacy and anonymity underlay all social media use, exchanging photographs is essential in negotiating partnerships and establishing trust. Pictures are often used to discover who is fake and who is real. However, the exchange of a real (or original) picture does not always occur immediately and is often done only after some level of trust is established. The following quotes illustrate the complexity of picture sharing and the development of trust:

“When you are talking, they will not give the original picture. They will give some other picture. After liking that picture and after we share that number, they will give another picture. They will give their original picture.” (GAY, 26)

Congruency between shared pictures is often a determinant of trustworthiness.

“Then we share pictures. I will check if their profile picture and the picture they send are the same. Sometimes, they send some other picture. If they don’t send the same picture, they are fake.” (BISEXUAL, 25)

This congruency is not only between different pictures of the same person, but also between what a person looks like and what their profile says and the expected conversation based on that profile information:

“[you]easily can identify duplicity in them because in profile there will be some kind of behavior... directly the way talk through will be different. Like that, the way they upload profile picture will be different.” (TRANSGENDER, 28)

Often times, both partners reveal enough about themselves to the other person in an attempt to maintain safety. When this balance of sharing personal information like photographs is not met, trust is broken.

“Instead of using their original photo like actor pictures, or else sexual pictures... good to avoid them. Otherwise if there has been own picture ok.” (TRANSGENDER, 28)

Interviews suggested that there is a delicate balance of revealing enough personal information to gain the trust of a partner while at the same time maintaining the privacy and safety of both parties. Social media platforms that cater specifically to MSM and transgender identities offer a level of safety that enable participants to share more freely their sexual preferences, identities, and even pictures.

“Mostly, now I don’t feel too scared to give my pictures in Planet Romeo. Because if when I give pictures in Planet Romeo and if they make some problem, he is also like that. That’s why he is also in Planet Romeo so no problem for me.” (GAY, 22)

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous research, our results show that MSM and TW in India are frequent users of social media technologies to meet potential sexual partners and engage with social communities (Pew, 2015). Several important themes emerged about how and why social media is used for partner selection, as well as the impact social media use has on safety and risk

behaviors. These themes include privacy, identity, expanding communities, emerging concerns and risk behaviors, and rules for maintaining safety throughout the process of partner selection.

An important theme that was revealed throughout all interviews was that of privacy. The privacy granted through social media platforms enabled participants to express their sexual desires freely without fear of judgment. This is important both for the avoidance of enacted stigma and the act of partner selection. The ability to maintain privacy throughout the process of partner selection when using social media can be contrasted against the traditional model of partner selection at cruising sites and hot spots. At cruising sites, the first meeting a person has is physical, as opposed to social media in which people meet virtually, which can force people to reveal more than they would like to a potential partner. The revealing of private information is especially sensitive given the context of stigma and the unsupportive legal system that currently exists in India. Though social media does not in itself mitigate all risks associated with revealing one's identity, it can provide a greater opportunity for meeting future partners or other members of the MSM and TW community in a way that maintains privacy. However, it is important to note that privacy is not guaranteed through the use of social media and as such privacy is created through a complex set of behaviors and rules.

Additionally, though literature has noted a lack of gay community in India, online venues have provided a space in which MSM and TW can create and participate in many communities (Chakrapani et al., 2002). These new communities may provide unique opportunities for health interventions and outreach. Interventions that have emphasized communities as a means of increasing engagement and empowerment concerning health issues have been successful in India. One notable example is the program Avahan, which mobilized sex worker communities around HIV prevention services. This program successfully unified a previously disparate sex worker group and as a result has seen dramatic strides in HIV prevention and empowerment (Laga et al., 2010). The MPOWERment project, a US based HIV prevention program for MSM, has also seen enormous success and utilizes the core principle of engaging the community in leadership (Hightow-Weidman, Lisa B., et al.). The thriving virtual communities seen in MSM and TW populations in India could provide opportunities for community engagement and rallying around MSM and transgender rights and health. However, engagement in personal or sensitive topics, such as partner selection, sexual behavior, or MSM and transgender rights within social media must maintain confidentiality among participants. Due to the effectiveness of interventions that focus on creating and empowering cohesive communities and the ability of social media to reach hidden populations while maintaining privacy, social media could prove to be an effective tool for intervention delivery.

Though social media has aided in creating a venue for community engagement and identity expression while avoiding everyday stigma and discrimination, it has also led to the development of new safety concerns. The decision to meet someone in person is influenced by

the perceived trustworthiness of the potential partner and the perceived threat of harm by an unknown person. Trustworthiness and threat is established through carefully constructed rules (way a person talks, congruency in profile, statements, pictures, and timeline). These rules show the power of externalized stigma and the change of the legal status of MSM, and at the same time demonstrate the adaptive coping strategies that enable MSM to traverse these complex and prohibitive social norms, in order to form social and sexual relationships.

Our data indicate that Social media is being utilized for partner selection. The articulated benefits of using social media to find partners also influence risk behaviors. More frequent sexual encounters, easier access to sex work, greater ability to find someone who is interested in a risky sex behavior (like group sex) are new realities of partner selection through social media. Interventions attempting to mitigate sexual risk behaviors must look to inform MSM and TW about safer behaviors and potential risks prior to the in person meeting between potential sexual partners. Physical spaces for intervention delivery must also begin to transition to the virtual realm. Sexual relations are increasingly being determined by interactions made through social media and interventionists have an opportunity to capitalize and the far reach of social media to spread a message. This is an especially important consideration when looking to assist populations that face large amounts of external stigma and barriers for accessing appropriate care.

Though this study adds to our understanding of how, why, and what is important about social media use in these populations there are limitations to its reach that future studies may be able to address. Translating from Tamil to English leaves room for error in transcription. In order to mitigate the effect of mistranslation a trained bilingual research assistant was involved throughout the interview, transcription, and data analysis process. Additionally, a random sample of the translated transcripts were back translated by a second staff member fluent in Tamil and English and checked for consistency. Additionally, participants were recruited from an NGO catering to the needs of MSM and transgender women and thus may not be representative of all MSM and transgender women in Chennai. However, this study can serve as a jumping off point for future research and interventions done with MSM and TW in India. In particular, this research raises questions about whether the use of social media to seek partners leads to increased sexual risk behavior and how to best utilize social media when attempting to influence sexual risk behaviors.

Findings here illuminate how new technologies interact with political and social contexts and in turn influence health behaviors. In summary, this study shows us how social media can liberate MSM and TW populations to anonymously explore their sexual and gender identities, but in doing so also creates a new realm of risks to both safety and privacy.

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