



Sexual diversity and social stigma on HIV prevention for Thai gay men

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It is widely accepted that HIV infection is a serious global health issue for gay men.

HIV prevention continues to be a challenge and appears to have been ineffective in some developing countries, including Thailand, with the number of new infections increasing (UNAIDS, 2012; Bureau of Epidemiology Thailand, 2014).

Gay entertainment areas in Bangkok have been associated with an increased incidence of HIV infection for the Thai gay community (Kittitornkul et al. 2011). An ethnographic study was conducted with 30 gay men in Bangkok, Thailand between May and August 2014. The aim of the study was to more deeply appreciate their everyday lives, particularly in relation to their perspectives on the prevention of HIV. Face-to-face semi structured interviews were held, along with non-participant observation in gay entertainment venues; field notes were also recorded.

Preliminary qualitative data from the study broadly suggests that participants' desire more specifically targeted HIV interventions, ones that better reflect an understanding of their everyday lives. Some of the more specific findings include the negative influence of social stigma on participants' lives and their family experiences and the diversity of sexual roles involved in being Thai, gay, and living in Bangkok.

Social influences on life experiences

Participants reported that gay men want to be treated equally and that they felt they were sometimes seen as less than human. Men reported being discriminated against which isolated and marginalised them within their own subcultural world. Mainstream Thai discrimination is reported by participants to negatively affect their self-esteem. It is also apparent from participants, that Thai families can reject their sons who come out as gay. Disclosing their sexuality to family can sometimes mean they will move away from their family. Discrimination from local community members is also described by participants as pushing men toward the urban areas in search of work and greater social acceptance. In contrast, gay men who were accepted by their family and community reported having a more comfortable life and felt more socially equal.

Sexual diversity

The findings of this ethnography describe a variation in the sexual identity of Thai gay men. For example, some men reported hiding their effeminate behaviour in order to appear to be more masculine, thus avoiding social conflict; and

others would display different sexual identities. The receptive-gay male (Gay Queen) for instance, might change his sexual role to be either insertive or receptive. This way he could then identify as being versatile (Gay Both).

The participants in this study described promiscuous behaviours and regularly changed their sexual partners. Participants said that some Thai gay male relationships have less permanence and are only short term compared with heterosexual ones. They described gay men as being forced to meet via the internet, or in gay entertainment venues, because being gay is not completely socially accepted in Thailand. Accordingly, the subcultural reasons for male gay multiple partnering need to be understood to develop a better more meaningful strategy for HIV prevention.

This brief report describes a rich tapestry of qualitative findings from an ethnographic study conducted in Bangkok, Thailand with gay men. The participants describe the Thai Bangkok gay community as emerging from underneath traditional Buddhist heterosexual cultural values and beliefs. Although many HIV prevention projects have been established in Thailand, this study indicates that there is still a large variation in the safe practice of sex in the gay community of Bangkok. Participants indicate there are many factors contributing to decisions to use, or not use a condom, or even to declare, or not declare their HIV status. These preliminary outcomes highlight the diversity and complexity of the Bangkok gay male subculture.



References

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