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## Young gay men's relationships & technology

"Hedge your bets": Technology's role in young gay men's relationship challenges

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## ABSTRACT

Technology is playing an increasingly pervasive role among young gay men in the process of meeting potential romantic or sexual partners. We investigated challenges posed by technology related to young gay men's relationships. Focus groups (n=9) of young gay men aged 18-24 (n=43) were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was used to identify two major themes regarding challenges to relationship development and maintenance. Sub-themes include unrealistic expectations of relationships, inauthentic self-presentation online, sexual primacy over romance, increased opportunities for infidelity, and jealousy. The implications of this study for sexual education and sexual health promotion are discussed.

Key words: dating, Internet, mobile applications, young men who have sex with men (YMSM), sexuality

## Introduction

Young people are increasingly using the Internet to form romantic and sexual relationships (Buente & Robbin, 2008; Griffiths, 2000; Shwartz & Southern, 2000). With the development of new technologies (e.g., web-based tools and mobile applications), new facets of and expectations for relationships have evolved (Gro, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger, & Bauermesiter, 2014). Gay men were among the first people to use the Internet for sexual and romantic purposes and are currently the largest group of online technology users, per capita (Albright, 2008; Gro, Ventuneac, Rendina, Jimenez, & Parsons, 2013; Gudelunas, 2012; Rosser et al., 2011). Rosenfeld & Thomas (2012) found that the gay men were significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to use technology to meet potential partners, in part because they have fewer partners to select from. Nearly 70% of partners in gay relationships from this study had indicated that they had originally met via online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Further, younger gay men are most likely to utilize technological approaches, in comparison to their older counterparts (Walsh et al., 2012). Thus, the Internet has become an integral tool for young gay men to connect with each other (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002).

A multitheoretical model called the Couple and Family Technology Framework has been adapted to describe the process of how technology use impacts couples and families (Hertlein, 2012; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014a), and many components of this model also fit for gay men (McKie, Lachowsky, & Milhausen, 2015). The model is separated into three components: ecological influences, changes to structure, and changes to process. The ecological influence component of

the model originally stems from a model called the “triple A engine” proposed by Cooper (1998). The A’s are aspects of technology which have changed the way that people meet and interact. The initial A’s were listed as: accessibility (the ability to meet potential partners’ with ease and gain access to more partners), affordability (the low cost associated with using the Internet and cell phone applications), and anonymity (the ability to remain discreet if one chooses to; Cooper, 1998). King (1999) later proposed acceptability (higher levels of tolerance and acceptance online); Ross and Kauth (2002) proposed approximation (relating to truth or lack thereof online); Hertlein & Stevenson (2010) proposed accommodation (conflict between one’s real and ideal self and the ability to act out either online), and ambiguity (online behavior can be difficult to define as problematic; i.e. are sexting and online flirting viewed as cheating?); and finally, McKie and colleagues (2015) established that the model was also relevant for a gay male sample and proposed assessment (the ability to pre-screen potential mates and assess for compatibility), and affirmation (the ability to explore one’s identity). Hertlein proposes that the confluence of the “A’s” have led to changes in the structure of relationships (i.e. redefinition of rules and roles) and the processes within relationships (i.e. relationship initiation and formation processes).

Before the Internet, gay men were limited and accustomed to meeting sexual and romantic partners in physical locations, such as gay bars, bathhouses, public sex venues / cruising grounds, and community groups, or through telephone chatlines (Frankis & Flowers, 2009; Grov et al., 2014). However, meeting in person has become a less popular way to seek out sex for gay men (Grov et al., 2014;

Weatherburn et al., 2012). Increasingly, gay and bisexual men have moved online to find romantic or sexual partners (Bull, McFarlane, & Rietmeijer, 2001; Davis et al., 2006; Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Chat rooms were among the first online tools used for sexual purposes among gay men (Groves et al., 2014). The proportion of young MSM meeting their first sexual partner online jumped from 3% in 1993 to 61% in 2002 (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2007). Some researchers have labeled the Internet as a modern bathhouse suggesting that, while bathhouses are still actively used today, it is much easier and more convenient to meet men online (Cooper's (1998) concept of "accessibility") (Chen, Gibson, Weide, & McFarland, 2003; Rosser, West, & Weinmeyer, 2008). For example, socio-sexual networking among MSM was revolutionized with the launch of Grindr™, which was one of the first and still most popular MSM-specific location-aware real-time dating mobile applications (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014), with 500,000 men joining in the first year. Over the next several years, men from 192 countries, equaling over six million men, were using the application (Grindr™, 2013). By 2013, at least one million men logged onto the application daily, with an average of seven million chat messages and two million pictures being sent each day (Grindr™, 2013). The majority of users spent more than ninety minutes on the application daily, logging in an average of eight times (Grindr™, 2013). Other websites commonly used by gay men followed suit by developing parallel mobile applications, thus making it even easier to find sexual partners (Groves et al., 2014; Rosenberger, Reece, Novak, & Mayer, 2011). Young gay men describe many benefits of technology, specifically the Internet, in terms of relationship formation and maintenance. In our previous

research (McKie et al., 2015), young gay men suggested that technology made it easier to find desirable and available partners for sexual and romantic relationships, to maintain those relationships once established, and that technology also facilitated relationship endings (via online communication). Young gay men report easy access to a large number of partners online, who they can then screen to ascertain sexual or relational compatibility (McKie et al., 2015; Ross, Rosser, McCurdy, & Feldman, 2007). Past research also indicates that young gay men value the anonymity that can be achieved online; this is especially true among those who have not come out and among those who do not want to be identified or seen as gay (Kubicek, Carpineto, McDavitt, Weiss, & Kipke, 2011; Ross, 2005). Still, other research has demonstrated that mobile and Internet technologies are promising tools for sexual and mental health promotion with MSM (Pachankis, Lelutiu-Weinberger, Golub, & Parsons, 2013; Rosenberger, Reece, Novak, & Mayer, 2011).

Though the Internet clearly offers many relational benefits (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014a; McKie et al., 2015), most of the research on the Internet, particularly among samples of gay men, has focused on the health risks and dangers of technology use (Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2011). The Internet has been associated with increased sexually transmitted infection (STIs) rates (including HIV), sexual risk behaviors (lack of condom use, sex under the influence of drugs and alcohol), and an increased number of sexual partners (Grosskopf, Levasseur, & Glaser, 2014; Horvath, Rosser, & Remafedi, 2008). Only a minority of research has addressed psychosocial challenges of Internet use specific to relationships among

gay men, as such, we draw upon some research among heterosexual adults to provide a context for the current investigation.

As Internet use has increased, concerns about online infidelity among heterosexual couples have also been reported in the literature. Though the definition of online infidelity has varied (Mileham, 2007), the development of sexual or emotional relationships online with extra-dyadic partners is typically considered problematic in relationships if unknown or not negotiated (Clayton et al., 2013; Mileham, 2007; Whitty, 2003). When relationships are on display via social networking sites, it creates a strong desire within individuals to ensure that their partner isn't cheating on them or doesn't even appear to be cheating (Muscanell et al., 2013; Utz & Buekeboom, 2011). Gut feelings, partner behavioral change, and secretive behavior have all been linked to perceptions of online emotional cheating (Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2013). Men report more concern about sexual infidelity, while women tend to report more concern about emotional infidelity, both offline and online (Guadagno & Sagarin, 2010). However, technology has made it easier for people to discretely fulfill sexual needs that are not being met within their current relationship(s) (Craft, 2012; Jones, 2010; Mileham, 2007; O'Sullivan & Ronis, 2013) support for Hertlein's proposition that technology has changed relationships among couples.

Indeed, jealousy seems to be a more prominent problem in romantic relationships as technology use has increased, specifically since the proliferation of social networking websites (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013; Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Muise, Christofides, & Desmaris, 2009; Muscanell, Guadagno, Rice, & Murphy,

2013; Stewart, Dainton, & Goodboy, 2014). Research indicates that heterosexual men and women use Facebook® as a tool to monitor their partner's activity; when an attractive member of the other sex interacted with their partner in some way, it evoked jealousy (Clayton et al., 2013; Muise et al., 2009). This was especially true for younger people and those in newer relationships (Clayton, 2013). Having contact with ex-partners was also found to be harmful to a current relationship and increase jealousy for the current partner. This was problematic as many people remained in contact with ex-partners on their social networking sites (Clayton et al., 2013; Stewart et al., 2014). However, no research to date has documented experiences of jealousy associated with online behaviour among gay men. It is unknown if findings based on heterosexual samples might apply to gay men.

Though sexual and romantic partners are more easily found online, with the advent of new dating and sexual technologies, deception in terms of self-presentation can make finding desirable or compatible partners more challenging. Research on heterosexual men and women indicates that physical characteristics, such as height and weight, are most commonly reported falsely (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). The more physically attractive an individual felt themselves, the more likely they were to falsely report or amplify their social status or education (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011; Toma & Hancock, 2010; 2012). Furthermore, use of pictures that were outdated or edited, or of another person entirely, was commonly reported among users of online dating sites (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001). Individuals also report lying verbally while chatting to a potential partner who they perceive to be more attractive than them (Cornwall & Lundgren, 2001; Lo, Hsieh, &

Chiu, 2013). There is some evidence that issues regarding authentic self-presentation occur among MSM (Blackwell et al., 2014). For example, several gay men in one study reported using only their best pictures and suggested that they were not always truthful with their sexual intentions online (Blackwell et al., 2014).

In summary, The CFT framework proposes that technology influences both the structure of and processes within couple and family relationships (Hertlein, 2012). Indeed research on technology use among heterosexual men and women points to several key relational challenges amplified by the influx of technology, specifically, jealousy and infidelity in relationships, deception during the relationship formation phase, and an emphasis on sexual over other aspects of relationships. These challenges reflect changes to the roles, rules, and boundaries in couple relationships, as well as to changes in relationship initiation, formation, and maintenance (Hertlein, 2012). However, research on technology use among gay men has largely focused on sexual risk-taking and HIV prevention (Bauermeister, Yeagley, Meanley, & Pingel, 2014; Grosskopf et al., 2014; Lehmler & Loerger, 2014; Rice et al., 2012) and has not investigated relational challenges more broadly. Thus, the purpose of the current analysis was to determine relational challenges associated with Internet-based technology use among a sample of young gay men.

## **Methods**

### **Participant Recruitment & Focus Groups**

Data for this analysis were collected as part of a larger study on sexual scripts among young gay men. For the purpose of the present analysis, only the transcript excerpts relating to technology use were examined. Participants were required to be

self-identified gay men aged 18-24 ( $M = 20.71$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ). Several recruitment approaches were adopted: circulating flyers in local gay-oriented or gay-friendly bars and clubs, posting flyers in LGBTQ+ resource centers, groups, and agencies in the cities and on university campuses, and finally, distributing electronic announcements within university classes and through email distribution lists. As an incentive, participants were given the option to enter a draw for \$100. Interested participants contacted the research team and completed a brief screening interview for eligibility. Of the 66 participants who expressed interest in the study, 43 of these men were eligible and successfully scheduled into a focus group. Men participated in one of nine focus groups ranging from 75-112 minutes in duration ( $M = 95$  minutes), which were run by a trained facilitator (third author) and note-taker (first author) who were both self-identified gay men. The focus group guide was organized into three sections (gay culture, sexual activity, and relationships), which included questions or prompts regarding technology use. In order to allow for in-depth discussion of each topic, groups were kept relatively small (3 to 7 participants) (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011). At the start of each focus group, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without ramification, told that the discussion would be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and even though all reporting would be anonymous they could choose to use an alias if desired. At the end of each focus group, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. These procedures were granted ethics clearance at both universities.

## **Analysis**

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guidelines were followed for the semantic/explicit approach (using participants words as data without further interpretation). The first phase requires the researcher(s) to become familiar with the data. As such, focus group discussions were listened to and transcribed verbatim by the first and third author using Express Scribe (NCH Software, 2010). The next phase involves generating initial codes, at a very basic level of analysis. All initial coding was completed by the first author using Nvivo Qualitative Software version 8 (QSR International, 2008). The third phase involves looking for patterns among the codes, which was done in collaboration by all authors. During this stage, themes and subthemes (if needed) are formed. The fourth phase calls for reviewing and refining of themes; re-evaluating, merging, and deleting themes where necessary. At the fifth stage, themes are defined and named. Phase six involved the production of this manuscript, which reports on these analyses.

In the current study, approximately 300 excerpts of text were coded to describe the study in the initial coding phase. These codes were originally organized into nine themes (i.e. lack of privacy, misinformation, unrealistic expectations, social isolation, disingenuousness, oversexualization, loss of romance, infidelity, jealousy) by the first and second author. Upon review of the themes by the third author, further refinement was undertaken. Relational challenges were reorganized into two main themes based on impact on developing and ongoing relationships with several sub-themes. Themes related to challenges considered to be more personal than relational (e.g., the potential for social isolation when spending excessive time online) were excluded.

## Results

A total of 43 young gay men participated across nine focus groups in the study. All were university students with 40% in their second year of an undergraduate program. The majority of the men were single (51%) or seriously dating (33%). Nearly all identified as White/Caucasian (86%). Analysis of the qualitative data resulted in a final thematic structure with two main themes: 1) challenges to relationship development, and 2) challenges to maintaining relationships. In support of each theme and associated sub-themes, transcript excerpts are presented below along with a pseudonym and the participant's age.

### **Challenges to Relationship Development**

Participants described three ways in which Internet-based technologies posed challenges to the development of new relationships: unrealistic expectations, inauthentic self-presentation, and sexual primacy over romance.

**Unrealistic expectations.** Participants described developing unrealistic expectations about relationships from exposure to sexual material online. One man stated, "the Internet gives you this incredibly false belief about what actually flies in the real world" (Frank, 20). Another man indicated:

Back when I was in high school, I was vain, I was so conceited because I thought every gay guy in the world wanted to be with me, because that is how they act online...and in real life it's not like that, so it totally sets up your expectations the wrong way. (Dylan, 20)

Participants indicated that online pornography was one of the most detrimental influences on their perceptions of sex and relationships in the "real

world". The men described turning to the Internet to learn about sex with other men, and later on discovering that it depicted gay sex in an unrealistic way.

Porn's interesting in that it exaggerates sex all the time...that's the gist of porn...before you ever have any sexual experience, but you've seen a lot of porn, you think that it's going to be like that. You don't like to think that. You know porn is stupid and that it's not like that when it happens, but when you go into it you still have those expectations. You really do. (Ian, 21)

Another participant indicated how the value of certain sexual acts was shaped through his experiences online. "[The] Internet gave me the impression that penetrative sex is the pinnacle and it just never appealed to me...the Internet set me off on a bad track" (Dylan, 20). The use of online technology for pornography and other sexualized material strongly shaped young gay men's expectations regarding sex and relationships, which produced difficulties when confronted with in-person situations and relationships.

**Inauthentic self-presentation.** Participants also described challenges in finding desirable partners because of the ways in which other individuals misrepresented their appearance or aspects of their personality online. Participants suggested that, in trying to present oneself in the most favorable light, people would use others' photos, use old photos, or lie about their traits or preferences. One participant explained his resultant frustration with these situations:

Say you are talking to someone online or something, you can frame your personality of them, or how you think they are, and anyone can say whatever they want. I think that's really unfortunate because when you meet someone

you completely sort of...it can be really different than what you thought.

(Zachary, 21)

Another participant explained that technology facilitated the use of deceptive behaviors:

I feel that there is a lack of accountability [on the Internet] in the sense that you don't have to be yourself, but when you are actually with someone...you can't, kind of, manipulate the things you say and who you are like you can on the Internet. (Riley, 20)

Some participants expressed harsh judgment for other men who knowingly misrepresented themselves online. One young man expressed:

Sometimes the deception can go quite far and become fairly elaborated, I have this friend, I just think it's skeezy as fuck, but he goes on online chat rooms and whatever and describes himself as '17 year old, 6'2, basketball player, very green eyes, bicurious, wanna have some erotic conversation' ...and he is some short weird looking guy. (Sebastian, 21)

Another participant stated, "I feel like most people are pretty naïve...who they think they are talking to could be a 58 year old homo". However, many of the participants admitted that they couldn't necessarily blame other men for altering their online appearance or statistics as they too had done the same. One participant cautioned:

You kind of change who you are sometimes, if you are not careful...because of the comfort zone, and because you are detached, and then that is not really who you are as a person, so it kinda gives a false definition to other people as to who you are. (Ian, 21)

As a result of the possibility for men to manipulate their self-presentation through these technologies, and this also being a shared common practice, these young men indicated that they were skeptical of the profiles they reviewed and critical of the experiences they had while online.

**Sexual primacy over romance.** Participants described the ease of accessing partners online for sexual contact. Some participants lamented the focus on quick and easy sexual encounters and wished for opportunities to develop deeper or more romantic relationships. One participant explained the negative impact of this situation for gay men and the technological environments (or lack thereof) that lead to it:

The dating websites seem to be full of people who will say anything and everything to get what they want, but afterwards they don't really have any use for you, which often leaves people jaded about what it means to have a sexual relationship to the point that perhaps all that is important is the next rendezvous. There is nothing like eharmony.com for gay men, where if you are actually interested in a long-term relationship to go...you're on a website that by and large tends to be about sex...and you find someone who claims that their interested in a long-term relationship, and later on you figure out if that is actually true or not. (Aaron, 23)

Another participant agreed with Aaron regarding a lack of romance-focused online dating sites for gay men compared with for heterosexual people. "There's no gay equivalent...most of them are primarily just 'ok, let's hook up and have random sex' websites, not dating websites...like, I'll get in touch, this is where you are, I'll come

meet you” (Charlie, 19). Young gay men expressed interest in websites that catered to romantic connections and development, but were limited by the availability of such technological platforms as these predominantly or exclusively focused on sex.

Many of the participants also explained how online interactions took away some of the fun and romance from the dating process. One young man explained:

Yeah, I don't think there's as much fun to it. You know it's nice having the build-up with somebody--whether it's just seeing them on campus or going out for dates, whereas it's sort of assumed that you're looking for the same thing if you're online...like you're both in it for a relationship or something else and it just takes the romantic, honeymoon stage away from it I think.

(Ethan, 22)

Another participant cautioned about potential dangers of spending too much time online with a new potential partner:

When you talk too much online, you just kinda run out of things before you even meet or you get turned off by the person...if you talk for hours a day, several days straight, then you kind of get bored and it takes the fun out of the anticipation of the first meeting...you know, what are we going to talk about when we've already talked about everything. (Cole, 21)

Either through shared expectations or assumptions that other men were looking for the same thing or through exhaustive conversations online, these young gay men expressed that the ways in which they used or were expected to use technology limited their romantic opportunities.

## Challenges to Maintaining Relationships

There were two main challenges that participants faced in maintaining their relationships as a result of online activity: increased opportunities for infidelity, and jealousy.

**Increased opportunities for infidelity.** Participants described how increased opportunity for easily accessible sex partners' threatened long-term or committed relationships. One young man explained:

Sex tends to be so widely available online...there's this idea that you can hedge your bets in a relationship by keeping those accounts active, and just in case things don't work out or if you start to get a little bit bored then there is always that temptation, always that option that you can stray. So, I think it can be damaging to long-term relationships. (Aaron, 23)

Many participants explained how newly available Internet-based technologies helped to facilitate infidelity with discretion. One participant explained how common these practices were. "I went on Craigslist and started looking at pictures to paint...you click on the 'man for man' or whatever and it's like you could go on every ten minutes and there would be people like, 'cheating, discreet'" (Jacob, 21). Participants suggested that men (gay or straight-identified) seeking discreet sex were common and described online requests they had encountered. One participant recounted a succinct post, "married, want to hook up with a guy" (Owen, 22), while another disclosed, "my sister found her boyfriend on there" (Zachary, 21). Men of any sexual orientation, particularly those in purportedly committed relationships,

were able to use technology to seek out anonymous sex; participants commonly shared concerns about this in terms of maintaining their own relationships.

**Jealousy.** Participants suggested that increased access to information about relationship partners as a result of the Internet could fuel jealousy within a relationship. One man explained his own experience:

When I'm in a relationship, I've had people yell at me and be like, 'well, why have they said that to you on Facebook', and I've been like, 'I dunno, it's just the way I talk to them. I've known them for 12 years.'" (Tyler, 24)

Jealousy facilitated through the Internet also factored heavily into relationship dissolution and ultimately one's ability to "move on" after a breakup. One participant explained:

I think Facebook can create a lot of jealousy because you see people writing on walls. When you break up with somebody it's easy to go through friends, and through those friends you can see what they are doing. (Cole, 21)

The impact or cycle of jealousy carried into and across relationships. One participant shared:

I've had a friend that [Facebook] ruined their relationship because their ex was jealous, they broke up, and it was a bad break up...they started seeing someone else and the new boyfriend broke up with them because of the stuff that their ex would write on their Facebook, not just his Facebook, but he accessed his new boyfriend's Facebook and would send him messages.  
(Tyler, 24)

Young gay men explained that jealousy, whether of relationships with friends or former romantic partners, was inextricably linked with online technology and posed ongoing challenges to emerging and ongoing relationships.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the ways in which technology challenge young gay men as they develop and maintain relationships. Nine focus group discussions, which focused on gay culture, sexual activity, and relationships both online and offline, were held among young self-identified gay men aged 18-24 recruited from two southwestern Ontario cities in Canada (n=43). Data pertaining to technology and its impact on sexual and romantic relationships were examined and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guidelines. Themes were organized into those relating to relationship development (i.e., unrealistic expectations, inauthentic self-presentation, and sexual primacy over romance) and relationship maintenance (i.e., increased opportunity for infidelity, and jealousy).

Findings in the current study related to relationship formation and maintenance fit well with Hertlein's (2012) model, developed to explain the influence of technology on family structure and process. Hertlein (2012) situates many of the changes to relationship process at the juncture of relationship formation. The men in the present study suggested that some of the more significant challenges online occurred at the time of relationship development. For example, participants suggested that online portrayals of sex and relationships gave young men a narrow and unrealistic sense of the way these take place in the "real world". Other research on gay men and other MSM has reported similar findings.

Specifically, participants in an Australian study of heterosexual, gay, and bisexual men indicated that porn often skewed their expectations of what sex 'should be like', and could create problems in relationships, especially among those relationships that were purely sexual (McKee, 2005). Men access sexually explicit material more frequently than women (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007) and gay men watch more sexually explicit material than their heterosexual counterparts (Downing Jr., Schrimshaw, Anteli, & Siegel, 2014), which may explain the strength of impact this practice has on the development of sexual norms, expectations, and attitudes of young gay men. In our study, young men described that the sexuality explicit material they viewed impacted the way in which they approached and acted in sexual situations, regardless of the fact that they generally knew pornography was not accurate.

As has been shown in the heterosexual literature (Cole, 2001; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014a; Seiter & Bruschke, 2007; Zillmann, Schmitz, & Blossfeld, 2011), our participants also indicated that men, including themselves, misrepresented themselves off and online when seeking sexual or relationship partners. This practice is quite common among heterosexual individuals as well; false impressions were raised among a university sample of young adults when asked about ways technology can weaken relationships (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014b). A study of 80 heterosexual participants in the United States found that 81% of people had lied at some point online about a physical attribute to appear more attractive to potential mates (Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma, Hancock, Ellison, 2008). In the present study, gay men suggested that they downplayed their

less desirable qualities and/or exaggerated their positive attributes. As such, our young gay men were suspicious of other men they met online, and this impeded relationship formation. However, men in our study also stated that they were guilty of lying about their own physical characteristics or social status. Clearly impression management is a concern among gay and straight individuals seeking sexual and romantic partners online.

Initial impressions are very important to the success of gaining a date or sex partner, and this helps explain why many people tend to misrepresent themselves from the very beginning of an interaction (Hall et al., 2010). In this regard, our findings suggest comparable processes at work among heterosexual individuals and gay men. Deception online may allow for more controlled and strategic management than face-to-face interactions (Hall et al., 2010). In a study of 5,020 heterosexual men and women in the United States, participants indicated that they felt somewhat at ease about lying as they viewed their deception as a balance between their true self and their ideal self (Hall et al., 2010). In another qualitative study with MSM using Grindr™, men were very aware of disingenuousness on the mobile application and stated that it was a common occurrence (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014). These men suggested that they trusted profiles with face pictures more than those that only had torso pictures (Blackwell et al., 2014). Interestingly, none of the participants noted innocent misperceptions – i.e., creating relationships based on fantasized or projected characteristics of online partners – a phenomenon which Hertlein (2012) noted can be detrimental to relationship formation. Instead, the

current participants described purposeful misrepresentation of self and believed others were also consciously misrepresenting themselves.

Though none of the young men in our study described serious concerns with their use of the Internet (e.g., sexually compulsive behavior), participants did indicate that connecting with other men online led to a focus on sexual rather than romantic aspects of relationships and, to a degree, a loss of romance. Men in our study stated that they felt that there was an expectation, if not a preference, for sexual relationships online and that romantic relationships were often left as a possibility post-sexual encounter. Part of the reason for this was the way in which technology facilitated ease of access to sexual partners and particular sexual encounters when desired. However, according to the young gay men in our study, the migration of early relationship conversations and interactions to online mediums has meant that some of the romanticism of the early stages of dating has been lost.

New technologies also challenged young gay men to maintain their relationships once established. First, participants stated that jealousy was easily evoked online given the pervasive public disclosure of personal interactions online, particularly with extra-relational close friends and ex-partners. Second, increased access to and solicitation from potential extra-relational sexual partners contributed to difficulties staying faithful. Hertlein (2012) suggests that the wide range of available partners available to connect with online can allow for “breaches of relationship rules”; and, further, that cybersex can be a prominent factor in relationship dissolution because the interactions with online others negatively

impact the function of off-line relationships. Students in Hertlein and Ancheta's (2014b) study of technology and relationships also indicated that jealousy and infidelity were common issues as a result of communication on mobile phones, sexting, and social media. In the current study, the widespread availability of new partners was noted by participants to contribute to a vicious cycle of jealousy and suspicion regarding who their partner was interacting with online. Some research has found that gay men are less likely to be jealous, as they are more likely to have permissive views towards extra-dyadic sexual encounters compared with heterosexual people (Dijkstra et al., 2013). Despite this, our participants communicated many concerns about the ease of accessing new sexual partners in terms of maintaining their current relationships.

In sum, young, gay male participants in the current study describe some challenges to forming and maintaining relationships which have been noted among similar heterosexual samples (e.g., Hertlein and Ancheta, 2014b) and which are in keeping with Hertlein's (2012) CFT Framework. The rules for relationships (Hertlein's "structure") appear to support a focus more on sexual than romantic relationships as a result of pornography use and the proliferation of available partners online. As well, infidelity as a result of connections made online creates a change with regard to relationship roles (at the extreme, when relationship breakups occur as a result). Additionally, according to the CFT framework, relationship processes evolve with new technologies, and the current participants described challenges to intimacy processes in keeping with this phenomenon. As

such, our data provide support for extending the utility of the CFT framework beyond heterosexual couples and families, to young gay males.

### **Strengths & Limitations**

This research focused on novel challenges, introduced by technology use, faced by young gay men in developing and managing their sexual and romantic relationships. The bulk of past research on gay men focuses primarily on sexual risks involving HIV and STIs, even within the more recent literature investigating technology use. Further, our research recruited a community sample, which provides a compliment to findings based on samples drawn from introductory psychology classes, sexual health clinics, or online dating sites (Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski & Donenberg, 2007), which provide particular views of gay men's perspectives and practices. Very few qualitative studies related to technology use have been conducted with gay male participants; our use of thematic analysis helps provide additional nuance and context to the published literature, which is largely based on findings from quantitative questionnaires. Further, a qualitative approach is useful as it can help capture and express the diversity of sexual experiences in a group, especially given individual differences in sexuality (Frith, 2000; Savin-Williams, 2014). Finally, there is a paucity of research reporting on Canadian gay men in the literature; this study helps to fill a gap in knowledge about the sexual and relational experiences of young Canadian gay men. The present findings have utility in clinical settings as they highlight the ways technology use can impact gay male relationships, which is especially important given the prevalence of men using technology to meet and communicate. It has been proposed that examinations of the

ways in which technology use influences dyadic relationships are timely and important in clinical work (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014b).

Though this study contributes much to our understanding of gay men's interaction with technology for relational purposes, the findings are limited in several ways. First, our study participants were primarily Caucasian men attending university; thus these findings should not be generalized to older or younger gay men, gay men with less formal education, bisexual or MSM men, or gay men with different racial and/or ethnic identities. Second, some limitations of the current study that are commonly experienced by sex researchers include response bias (participants are more liberal than representative samples) and social desirability (people may preferentially report their attitudes and behaviors regarding sexuality to what they believe is expected or acceptable) (Rathus et al, 2013). Finally, because we used focus group methodology, the men who participated are more likely to be outgoing, comfortable discussing sexual matters, and more likely to be fully out compared with other men who chose not to participate. Our facilitator tried his best to limit groupthink and encourage the sharing of dissenting opinions and alternate experiences. In our opinion, the majority of participants appeared to speak freely, commonly disagreeing with other men in the focus group. Further, sometimes focus group methodology can encourage participants to share more information (Frith, 2000), especially among young gay men who are encouraged to speak in an affirming environment (Allen, 2006).

### **Future Research**

Given gay men's disproportionate and increasing use of the Internet for sexual purposes (dating, pornography, education, and chat rooms) (Downing Jr. et al., 2014), there is a critical need for additional research in this area (Cooper, Delmonico & Burg, 2000; Gnilka, 2009; Albright, 2008). Future research must seek to disentangle the ways in which novel and emerging technologies impact knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and norms – including associated processes of acquisition, change, and maintenance – from individual (e.g., personality traits and self-esteem), interpersonal (e.g., relationship agreements and communication styles), and cultural factors (e.g., gender roles and sexual scripts). Our findings could inform future quantitative research with larger, more diverse samples in order to understand the prevalence and impact of deception, jealousy, and infidelity experienced throughout the process of online relationship development and maintenance. We must better understand the sexual scripts of young gay men in order to address the current tensions expressed by our participants regarding the role of sexual behavior within romantic relationship initiation and development. Longitudinal research would be useful in determining generational differences as well as providing some insight as to how gay men's perceptions and use of technology change as they age, as relationships develop and dissolve, and as technology evolves.

### **Implications**

Our study findings have important implications for counseling, sexuality and health education, as well as sexual health promotion and service provision, particularly as they relate to delivery through online and/or electronic mediums.

Young gay men rely on technology, which has resulted in a number of challenges to successfully navigating and maintaining healthy sexual and romantic relationships. Their reliance on pornography as a source of education must be addressed through the provision of culturally relevant (gay friendly) and age-appropriate resources. Young gay men have an interest in and also need information on role modeling of healthy relationships, ones that establish realistic expectations while also connecting meaningfully with the diversity of young gay men. It is important that these resources also address young gay men's expectations regarding what is seen as attractive and desirable, which may help to avoid the propensity to represent oneself as the "ideal gay man". These materials should be promoted and made accessible in ways that ensure broad exposure and uptake. Mobile applications have been used as interventions to prevent provide support for gay men (Holloway et al., 2014). Our findings may help inform future development of such interventions in ways that are sensitive to and prioritize young gay men's interest in relationship formation and maintenance.

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